

# Braille camps helping blind kids learn

SPECIAL TO FLORIDA WEEKLY

In 1968, nearly half of all blind children learned to read and write Braille. Today, just six percent learn Braille. The other 94 percent of blind and low vision children remain illiterate the rest of their lives.

That's why the Braille Institute of Florida applied for and won a state grant to conduct several Beginning Braille Summer Camps throughout southwest Florida. The grant comes from the Florida Department of Education's Division of Blind Services, and includes the creation of southwest Florida's only Children's Braille Library and Bookstore, with a Braille Mobile and early screening center to be added in the future.

"Blind children who do not learn Braille at an early age, are cheated of an equal education," said Gail Ghigna-Hallas, PhD, educator and president of the Braille Institute of Florida, headquartered in Lee County. "When a child cannot read, academic learning is inhibited," she said.



COURTESY PHOTO  
Blind student Winona Brackett, age 7, proudly shows off her Braille Readers are Leaders award for reading 1,000 pages in Braille. Pictured left to right, are Winona's mom, Debbie Brackett, Winona, Dr. Gail Hallas, President of the Braille Institute of Florida, member of the National Federation of the Blind, Organization of Parents and Teachers of Blind Children.

wisely to teach children Braille," she said. During the camps, children 3-11 learn to:

- Define the Braille code and name the child inventor;
- Using the six-dot Braille cell, identify and practice using alphabetic letters;
- Recognize, read and write simple Braille words; and
- Write and publish an original poem or short story using a stylus and slate, and Perkins electric Braille.

The camps will be held in Cape Coral, Fort Myers, and Port Charlotte, on June 19, 21, July 10, 12, 24, and 26.

The Braille Institute of Florida is working closely with the National Federation of the Blind, and the National Organization of Parents and Teachers, Braille Readers are Leaders group, state legislators, and area pediatric ophthalmologists, in an effort to impact the educational quality of Florida's blind and low-vision children.

Local blind teenagers and adults with expertise in Braille will assist in the program; and experienced guitar teachers will head short sessions in beginning guitar. The cost is \$96 for 12 hours, and includes all Braille and musical equipments, educational workbooks, supplies, snacks, beverages, and lunch.

For more information or to register for one of the Beginning Braille Camps, contact the Braille Institute of Florida at (239) 671-0946 or email [WinningKidsClub@aol.com](mailto:WinningKidsClub@aol.com). ■



COURTESY PHOTO  
Blind student Niki Dondero of Cape Coral, age 15, learns to play the guitar from Charles Johnson, music director for the Braille Institute of Florida. Niki has been reading Braille since age three, and will assist in teaching at the Braille Institute's Summer Camps.

Hallas, an educator, child advocate, and children's Braille storybook writer, lost the vision in one eye due to an injury three years ago, and says that most policy-makers erroneously believe a blind person can get an education from listening to tapes. "Many of my blind friends and colleagues are successful business leaders, lawyers, teachers and social workers. Without their early Braille literacy education, they would be among the 80 percent of blind adults who are unemployed. Our tax dollars are used more

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