

**iCanConnect Program Opens World of Opportunity for Deaf Blind College Student from Long Island**

With no vision and limited hearing, technology has always been crucial to Mike Conlon’s education. As a little boy in grammar school, computers enabled him to communicate with his teacher and be part of a mainstream classroom. Now, at age 30, he needs to complete just a handful of courses to earn a degree at Suffolk County Community College in Riverhead, New York.

Thanks to new technology, this latest phase of Conlon’s education may well be his easiest.

This spring, Conlon started using a Braille Sense U-2 portable braille reader. It has changed his world. Notes from fellow students and assignments from professors appear at his fingertips instantly. For the first time in his college career, he’s able to work at the same pace as the rest of his classmates.

“I can get information directly from people instead of having to wait for it to be put into braille and then delivered to me,” explains Conlon. “It’s much quicker.”

The Braille Sense U-2 also gives Conlon added security. Because of his limited hearing, he often misses phone calls. With the Braille Sense he can get email messages anytime.

“If I’m running late, I can email and tell him to wait in a safe place,” says Mary Conlon, Mike’s mother. “If he’s standing in the parking lot waiting, then he’s not safe.”

With a price tag in the thousands, however, the Braille Sense U-2 is not something Conlon or his family could afford. Fortunately, he qualified for the National Deaf Blind Equipment Distribution Program (NDBEDP) that provides communications equipment at no charge to people with vision and hearing loss who meet income guidelines. Also known as iCanConnect, the NDEBDP provides a wide array of equipment from iPhones to braille readers to phone amplifiers.

Mike Conlon also received a new computer with updated JAWS screen-reading software which gives him internet access.

“Access to the internet is becoming a necessity for kids in school and just to stay connected to the world,” says Mary Conlon. “I’m hoping it will give him a better understanding of the world and then he can go out and be a more interesting person and expand his friendships. The deafblind have very few friends. I hope this will be a leap forward in his socialization.”

Connecting people with vision and hearing loss to others – whether it’s a family member across town or an online community across the world – is the goal of the NDBEDP. Each state runs the program through a partner agency that provides one-on-one training. Mike Conlon accessed the NDBEDP through the program’s New York partner, the Helen Keller National Center (HKNC).

“It was great to be able to discuss my needs with the people at HKNC who then helped select the equipment that would be best for me,” explains Conlon. “In addition they gave me training, which is very important.”

Mike, who plays the piano and cites the “History of Rock-n-Roll” as his favorite college course, remains unsure of his career plans. One thing does seem clear: new technology will make pursuing his ambitions much easier.

“The iCanConnect program,” says Mary Conlon “is such a blessing.”

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