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## Accessibility is Her Stock and Trade

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Sandy Eisenberg holds the dictation apparatus that translates spoken words into text.

By LORENA FERNANDEZ 15.MAR.07

### Total Recall offers closed captioning of municipal meetings and events.

At 230 words per minute, Sandy Eisenberg can type a conversation faster than the average person can talk.

“Trust me, it’s tiring,” she said recently as she leaned back on a chair pulling away from her stenographer. The small machine resembles a short, unlabeled version of a computer keyboard that can split in two in order to separate hands and sits on a tripod.

Eisenberg, owner of the real-time captioning business Total Recall, provides the city of West Hollywood with captioning services for televised events such as City Council and Planning Commission meetings. She and the approximately 30 independent contractors she employs cover governmental events for several cities in the area — Santa Monica, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Irvine, Simi Valley — private events and classes that deaf and hard-of-hearing students take at universities like the California Institute of Technology, University of Phoenix and University of Judaism. Though she never aspired to become a typist, she said, Eisenberg began attending Bryan College to become a court reporter after listening to a commercial on the radio about the career. “I was getting off the freeway and I heard it on the radio and that was it,” she said, adding the potential salaries of a court stenographer seemed appealing to her as a single mother.

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Eisenberg took classes for five years, but before she graduated to work in the court system she found a more personalized way to use her typing skills. In 1992, Cal State Northridge, which has the largest population of incorporated hard-of-hearing students in the nation, was looking for someone to provide captioning for the hard-of-hearing students as a new technology.

Eisenberg became the first person in the Cal State system to work as a university stenographer, and soon other institutions in the area began to follow Northridge's lead. She was hired by UCLA to provide the service and became the technical liaison for post-secondary institutions at a national level.

By 2000 Eisenberg decided to establish her own real-time captioning business and has since expanded to cover several aspects of the quotidian life of hard-of-hearing people.

"There was a gal that I worked with and she was a woman in her 30s and she was going to become an audiologist," Eisenberg recalled. "She and I were sitting there, waiting for class to start and she was looking around and the students were chit-chatting ... she said to me, 'What are they saying?' and I said ... just small talk." The woman had never heard small talk before, so she asked Eisenberg to type what her classmates were saying. "It's an experience in life that we take for granted, and it's really great that we can provide this accommodation," Eisenberg said.

Nevertheless, services for computer assistant realtime translating, broadcast captioning and transcription are relatively new and still scarce. "There's not a standard for quality, just for quantity," Eisenberg said, though she assures the services of Total Recall are over 99 percent accurate.

Stenographers differ from keyboards in the way words are put together; instead of spelling a word letter by letter, a stenographer works on phonetic syllables, but unlike court reporters who have time to transcribe their notes to text that has correct spelling, realtime captioning demands the translator to develop letter by letter spelling. "[Teachers] told us it was like learning to play concert piano," she said. Piano lessons with good grammar and active listening skills makes this a demanding job. Though there is no standard of practice, Eisenberg likes to pair up stenographers when there is a long event because, she said, she knows what it's like to take on lengthy events without a break and she would not want to put her staff through it.

Fortunately for Total Recall employees, real-time captioning can be done over the phone. In fact, people in Canada have captioned West Hollywood City Council meetings as they are broadcast in Channel 10. As part of the recognition during 2004's National Disability Awareness Month (October) the West Hollywood Council gave Eisenberg a commendation for her "dedication to helping people with disabilities."

Eisenberg agrees with West Hollywood's progressive attitude. "It's a really cool city to be involved with," she said, adding she likes the welcoming atmosphere and working with people at City Hall.

Statistics show one out of 10 people experience hearing loss, which is one of the main reasons Total Recall has found a niche and is constantly expanding. "We do try to capture the whole experience," Eisenberg said, since captioning is also proven helpful for people who have English as a second language or who simply are better visual learners. Not surprisingly, Total Recall has grown "entirely through word of mouth," she said. - Photo by Gary McCarthy