

Helping Blind Hams

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There are many hams who are blind or with limited eyesight but they manage to have a great time on the radio. They're capable, organized, and participate in many events like anyone else. There's a contesting group that uses the name BRAILLE during NAQP CW contests, and there's a groups.io group called *blindhams* with numerous members. It's quite a vibrant community.

The reason I got involved with all of this is because I had a good friend whom many dedicated CW operators remember: Summer Hartzfeld, VE5SDH. Summer was blind from birth and only got started in ham radio later in her adult life, but quickly took to CW and became a highly skilled operator. She was a member of CWops and also the First-Class CW Operators' Club (FOC).

In 2018, I designed and built a few special semiautomatic Morse keys (bugs) that were made entirely of wood, called WoodBugs [Ref. 1], and serial number 1 went to Summer. I even put her callsign on it in Braille. Summer used it regularly on the air and called it "finger candy." Sadly, she passed away from cancer in 2019. Her key was returned to me but I quickly found another worthy recipient: Dave Hillebrandt, W4CI. Dave is also blind, is another FOC member, and had actually met Summer. And he, too, is a very skilled bug driver, so that was a match made in heaven. Needless to say, Dave was quite surprised to receive his new key with its special pedigree. It's now his favorite and you can find him using "Woody" on the bands nearly every day. We've even had a number of WoodBug to WoodBug QSOs over the years.

Recently it came to pass that I had a spare radio, a Kenwood TS-590S. It turns out that this is not only an excellent transceiver value but thanks to their Voice Guide System module (VGS-1) it's also rated as the most handicapped-accessible radio on the market [Ref. 2]. With that module installed, the rig can announce key presses, frequency, S-meter readings, and all sorts of useful information. It's a cleanly-integrated solution, well-designed and easy to use as is the rest of the radio. It seems that every blind ham I've run into owns this rig. Kenwood offers several other radios for HF and VHF with similar accessibility and should be applauded for this effort.

Since the radio was excess to my needs, I got ahold of Dave and asked him to find a worthy blind ham to whom I might donate the rig. He initially contacted *Handi Hams* (handiham.org, part of the Courage Kenny Rehabilitation Institute) but they weren't able to locate a someone with the appropriate needs. Luckily, Dave knew of a fellow not far from his QTH in Florida: Tom Moore, KF4YEY. Tom is fully blind and a good CW op. But like many folks, he doesn't have a ton of money to spend on radio gear, so we agreed that this was a good match. I shipped the radio off to Dave, and he helped Tom get it set up. After getting it connected to his laptop, Tom was on the air with it right away and says he's having a great time.

During Field Day 2022, Dave and Tom got together with their local club, the Lake Monroe Amateur Radio Society, and operated as a team at the *Blind Guys CW Station*. The club helped them set up and made the station accessible, and my old TS-590S was widely heard. The team

was even featured on a news segment on WESH TV, Orlando [Ref. 3]. As I said, these guys are very capable and it's a joy to see them in action with the rest of their club.

I plan to stay involved as an advocate for blind hams everywhere, and I've even started learning Braille! The important lesson here is that there are many hams, maybe new or unfortunate, handicapped or not, who can benefit from your excess equipment, your help, and your encouragement. That's real ham spirit in action.

References

1. "QST Congratulates its Key Competition Winners," Nov 5, 2019. <http://www.arrl.org/news/qst-congratulates-its-key-competition-winners>
2. *Active Elements* website, devoted to improving accessibility for radio amateurs. Includes product reviews, operating tips, and more. <https://active-elements.org/2012/12/01/kenwood-ts-590/>
3. "Central Florida blind ham radio operators compete in nationwide contest for emergency preparedness", WESH News, June 25, 2022. <https://www.wesh.com/article/central-florida-radio-operators-contest/40419505#>



Photo 1

Dave Hillebrandt, W4CI, the capable owner of WoodBug S/N 1.



Photo 2

Tom Moore, KF4YEY, trying out his new TS-590S. He can operate it with his eyes closed :-)
Photo by W4CI. Yes, blind people take photographs!

About the Author

Gary Johnson, NA6O, holds an amateur extra license and has been a ham since 1972, starting out in Illinois as WB9JPS. After graduating from the University of Illinois, he spent his career as an electronics engineer before retiring after 35 years. He enjoys station building, contesting, and anything to do with CW. His other hobbies include woodworking and metalworking. He and his wife, Katharine, live by a vineyard in Livermore, California.