

Helping Blind Hams

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There are a lot of hams who are blind or with very limited sight but they manage to have a great time on the radio. They're organized, and participate in many events. There's a contesting group that uses the name BRAILLE during NAQP CW contests, and there's a groups.io group called *blindhams* with quite a few members. The reason I got involved with all of this is because I had a good friend whom some of you might 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 FOC.

In 2018, I designed and built a few special semiautomatic keys (bugs) that were made entirely of wood, called WoodBugs, and Summer got serial number 1. 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, 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. We've even had a number of WoodBug to WoodBug QSOs over the years.



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

Recently it came to pass that I had a spare radio, a very nice Kenwood TS-590S. It turns out that this is not only the best transceiver value but it's also the most handicapped-accessible radio on

the market. Kenwood offers the Voice Guide System module (VGS-1) that also works in the TS-570. With that installed, the rig can announce key presses, frequency, S-meter readings, and all sorts of useful information. It's a cleanly-integrated solution, very nicely designed and easy to use as is the rest of the radio. Nearly every blind ham I've run into owns this rig.

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 blind 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.

I plan to stay involved as an advocate for blind hams everywhere. 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.



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