

KENDALL

# Braille Institute helps people keep reading

■ Through an international nonprofit group, visually or physically impaired residents can continue to enjoy a love of reading.

BY MARCELLA MCCARTHY  
Special to The Miami Herald

Jean Van Dam used to read two to three books a week. But at the age of 88, her deteriorating vision made it impossible for her to keep up that pace.

"Books are educational and take you all over the world — and right from your armchair," said Van Dam.

Over the years, the Jewish Braille Institute came to her rescue and many others whose visual impairment or physical disability prevented them from reading.

Through the institute, Van Dam has been able to continue traveling and learning without leaving home.

Offering more than just materials in Braille, the institute in August began sponsoring an Audio Book Club at Van Dam's retirement home in Kendall.

On Nov. 20, she and four others attended the group meeting to listen to and discuss the last chapters of *Snow in August*, a novel by Pete Hamill.

*Snow in August* is one of Van Dam's favorite books, and her affection for the book — which tells the story of an unlikely relationship between an Irish-Catholic boy and a Jewish rabbi in 1940s Brooklyn — is contagious.

Frieda Mitzenmacher, 83, sporting black and white Puma sneakers, was reading the book in large print and simply couldn't put it down, she said.

"The telephone would ring, and I would have to take the book with me."

Van Dam shared a similar experience from her childhood; her friend Francis was babysitting one night and the owners of the home told her to be careful when she used the bathroom



PHOTOS BY CHRIS CUTRO/FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

**RAPT:** Above, from left, Jean Korner, Dorothy Severino, Marlene Gross, Frieda Mitzenmacher and Jean VanDam listen to the book *Snow in August* by Pete Hamill during the JBI Audio Book Club meeting at Palace Renaissance in Kendall. Below, Marlene Gross and Frieda Mitzenmacher laugh at a passage from the story.

because they had just painted the toilet seat. But Francis was just too consumed to put down *Gone with the Wind*.

"Well she paid no attention. She was reading and she just had to go to the bathroom and she sat down and couldn't get up," Van Dam said. "Oh, they had to get a plumber; they had to take her to the hospital."

Several of the five group members burst out laughing.

Phyllis Levy, the Miami institute's outreach coordinator, leads Van Dam's group at the Palace Renaissance assisted-liv-



ing facility in Kendall. Before Levy brought the club to the Palace, there weren't any book clubs that met the physical needs of

the Palace Renaissance residents.

What did residents do before the book club? "We played blackjack," Van Dam said. "We're a bunch of gamblers."

While they still make time for blackjack, their weekly schedule now includes Friday meetings of the Audio Book Club.

Levy, a retired Miami-Dade librarian, hardly acts retired. She is currently the librarian at the Jewish Community Center in Kendall. At the center, she runs a free audio book club that's open to all and meets on the second Tuesday of each month.

With 28 years of experience helping Miami residents select books, Levy, who caters her book selections to the interests of each group, is a knowledgeable source for the institute and its members.

"Every group has a different theme. This is a more light and fun literature group," she said of the Palace group. "They wanted more contemporary Jewish literature."

The institute is an international nonprofit organization with a library of more than 13,000 Talking Books and several thousand Braille and large-print titles — all of which are free.

The service is pretty convenient, too; it operates like Netflix.

The materials are sent to your home and return postage is included. All materials are of Jewish interest.

The stories are not necessarily religious, and the organization welcomes all faiths.

At The Palace, the reading group is a diverse bunch as well. Of the five members who attend, two are Christian. "This is America," Van Dam said. "We have different groups, and that's what America's all about."

"I learned a lot about the Christian religion from this book [*Snow in August*], and it's very interesting. We all learn."

"That's why books are so wonderful."