

Designer of pioneering Braille math code dies (Update)

October 3 2013, by Jeff Karoub

Abraham Nemeth, the blind designer of the internationally recognized Nemeth Braille Math Code that simplified symbols for easier use in advanced math, has died at his home in suburban Detroit, relatives said Thursday. He was 94.

Nemeth, who was originally discouraged from pursuing his passion for math because of his blindness, died of congestive heart failure on Wednesday at his home in Southfield, said his niece, Dianne Bekritsky. She said her "uncle Abe" had passions ranging from science to music—he even worked his way through college by playing the piano in bars—and was long devoted to the blind community.

Nemeth started working on the code in the 1940s, seeking a simpler system to what was being used at the time. The New York native, who also spent 30 years as a mathematics professor at the University of Detroit Mercy, continued to develop the math code until the end of his life and has been lauded for his work by the blind community and advocates.

But the innovations almost didn't happen. Nemeth originally studied psychology after counselors discouraged him from pursuing math because he was blind, Bekritsky said. He went on to earn his master's degree in psychology from Columbia University. Encouraged by his wife to pursue his passion, Nemeth went back to school to study math, which led to his pioneering work with Braille codes, Bekritsky said.

"The best kind of charity you can give to a person is giving them the ability to make do on their own. The independence they get with the Nemeth Code is invaluable," she said.

Nemeth started developing the Braille math code while working at the American Foundation for the Blind in New York and taking math classes at Brooklyn College. He said in a 1991 interview with a Braille computing newsletter that he sought to devise a system that offered a simpler, more streamlined approach to an existing system, and one that simulated rules of speech.

The Nemeth code is a Braille version of mathematical and scientific symbols. Nemeth wanted to create for math what the literary Braille code provides for words, but make it useful for algebra, geometry and calculus, according to an American Foundation for the Blind website. He sought to simplify and streamline an existing code from England, which he thought used too many symbols.

Despite a driving focus on math and computer science, Nemeth had diverse interests. He was an accomplished pianist who "put himself through college" playing at bars and clubs, Bekritsky said.

Nemeth was preceded in death by two wives. He is survived by three stepchildren, two nephews and a niece. His funeral was held Thursday.

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