

AMAZING ACHIEVER

Jalen Ballard, 7, who already composes music, soon will compete in national Braille Challenge

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The words you are reading right now are written in 9-point font called Utopia. Large-print books have letters that are at least 16 points in size.

For 7-year-old Jalen Ballard to read something, it must be in a 72-point font, and even then he has to hold his face within an inch of the text.

The second-grader at Elmhurst Elementary School in West Toledo was born with a condition called microphthalmia that left his eyes small and underdeveloped. He's had nine surgeries to treat glaucoma since then and had to have the lenses removed from both eyes because of cataracts.

But none of that mattered earlier this year when he took part in a regional competition for the Braille Challenge held in Grand Rapids, Mich. And none of it matters when he composes music on his synthesizer workstation keyboard at home or types on the computer.

"This kid is just an amazing kid," said Darlene Limmer, teacher of the visually impaired at Elmhurst.

Young Ballard was one of about 750 children expected to take part nationally in the recent Braille Challenge, sponsored by the Braille Institute and testing things like spelling and comprehension. He and his parents, Scott and Michelle Ballard, are hopeful that he will move on to June's finals in California thanks to his score of 100 percent. (That announcement will come in May.)

VIDEO

See Jalen play ['Brick House'](#) and ['Stormy Monday'](#)

"It went great," Jalen said.

Charis Austin, coordinator for the regional competition and a client advocate at the Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired, said the contest is an important chance for these young people to socialize and interact.

"When you're different you know it," she said. "And this is like, 'Hey, this is cool. Braille is good.' "

That was a main reason Mrs. Ballard wanted her son to make the trip to participate.

"It was something he could compete in and have fun," she said. "I think it was good for him because he was with other children that were blind. He was with other kids who were completely like him."

Braille, the system of raised dots that the sight-impaired can use to read, may be a low-tech option in a high-tech world where computers can talk, but mastering it is as essential as ever, according to Mrs. Austin.

"If my computer breaks down and I don't have braille, I don't have another way to write," she said.

Only about 10 percent of sight-impaired youngsters learn to read braille, according to the National Federation of the Blind.

Jalen has been learning it since kindergarten, and he's happy to use his braille writer, which resembles a typewriter with only a few keys, to work on homework for school. He won't let it define him, though. The young



Jalen Ballard, 7, at his braille machine, is a second-grader at Elmhurst Elementary School. (THE BLADE/LORI KING)

boy is just as eager to work on the computer nearby, which can read aloud what he types, or create music.

He started on the piano before he turned 2 thanks to his father, who sings and plays keyboard and guitar in the local band Skoobie Snaks and is a music minister at St. Stephen Lutheran Church in Sylvania.

"I put big letters with masking tape on the piano at the time to teach him at least what the notes were," Mr. Ballard said. "Then I realized one day that he could hear a note and tell me what it was just by hearing."

Now Jalen concocts his own tunes and sometimes accompanies Mr. Ballard and his bandmates on hits like "Night Moves" and "Brick House." He likes what he hears. Always has.

As Jalen said, "I really liked to do music and I really liked to record music."

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