

## Did You Know That Captioning for Television Started With the Captioned Films for the Deaf Program?

by Jo Ann McCann

**Project Officer for Closed Captioned Television Programming  
U.S. Department of Education**



[EDITOR'S NOTE: Ms. McCann wrote this article in 2002. For a recent biography of the author, please refer to the last page of this article.]

*Jo Ann McCann, daughter of alumni of the Maryland School for the Deaf--Fred and Anna Henklein--grew up in Baltimore, Maryland. She is a CODA, a member of the NAD, is a RID-certified interpreter, and has served as a Project Officer for the U.S. Department of Education for more than 15 years.*



People often ask me why the U.S. Department of Education is involved in closed-captioned television and ask about what kinds of programs we caption. I explain that captioning started with the Captioned Films for the Deaf program. For those of you who remember, this was the program that captioned movies and made them available for viewing by deaf clubs across the country. The films were for deaf audiences only. No admission fees could be charged to see a movie. As a CODA growing up with deaf parents in the Baltimore area, we waited forever to get to see a popular movie at the club because it took nearly a year to get the movie open-captioned, and then the Captioned Films program only had a limited number of copies of the movie. These copies had to be mailed back and forth across the country. As they say, "We've come a long way, baby!"

As television became more a part of everyday life and culture, we looked at ways to make television viewing possible for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing. It is hard to believe that our great success was the captioning of 16 hours a week on broadcast television! Today we can often flip through more than 16 channels of captioned television programs airing at the same time. Gone are the days when everyone had to watch the same few programs.

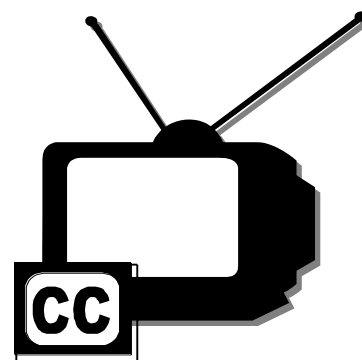
I started working at the Department of Education in 1986. I was trained and mentored by the late Dr. Mac Norwood, "the father of closed-captioning," to continue his work with captioned television. Part of my early responsibilities within the Department was for the closed-captioned decoder design, development, manufacture, and distribution. The \$20.00 consumer rebate coupons were part of that project.

My first captioning project was for captioned children's programming which made it possible for children who are deaf or hard of hearing to enjoy the popular Saturday morning cartoons.

Early on, we set up a pilot project to look at technology to convert teleprompter information to captions. This led to a grant for daytime programming and the captioning of the ever popular "soaps" which were airing five days a week.

Captioning syndicated programming faced the problem of programs shown as reruns in a packaged format. These programs, which once had captions, are rebroadcast in syndication and are often shortened to provide additional time for commercials. This makes the original captions unusable. The key is to caption an entire block of programming before the product is distributed to various television markets for rebroadcast in your local area.

The first captioned sports programming came about because I sold Mac Norwood on the idea of immediate access to changes in the lineup for baseball games and for the introduction of sports terminology for deaf kids taking physical education classes. I convinced Mac that kids need to be exposed to words such as "dribble," "putt," or "offside," and captioning provides that exposure. Mac was finally sold on the idea when he had an opportunity to pick up on some golf tips by watching a golf pro on a captioned sports program. Mac was all smiles when he came to work on Monday because those golf tips helped him beat his golf buddies that weekend. Mac sure did love to play golf.



We now caption several different programs originally broadcast in Spanish. We are also funding 13 projects for the captioning of local news and information programs across the country. These local news projects help small captioning companies get started.

We made it possible for the very popular PBS children's program *Arthur* to be more accessible to younger deaf or hard of hearing children by encouraging the grantee and producers to create and include easy reader, or edited, captions. *Arthur* has two kinds of captions: near verbatim captions and easy reader captions. Viewers can switch back and forth between the two.

Closed Captioned Educational Programming provides funds for the captioning of broadcast or cable television programs that can be videotaped and used in the classroom. This captioning includes The History Channel Classroom, A&E in the Classroom, Noggin, Animal Planet, Nickelodeon, and The Weather Channel. We have included the captioning of *Plaza Sesamo*, the Spanish version of *Sesame Street*. Beyond that, we are funding Accessible Educational Television, which will caption and describe programming so that it can be widely used in the classroom by both students who are deaf or hard of hearing and by students who are blind or have low vision.

It is very exciting to be involved with captioned television programming which includes nearly all types of broadcast and cablecast television programming. I hope all your favorite programs have quality captions, and if they don't, you need to let the National Association of the Deaf know.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jo Ann McCann wrote this article in 2002 when she was Project Officer for Closed Captioned Television Programming at the U.S. Department of Education (ED). She continues as Project Officer for captioning and video description, and her oversight of the early "Design, Manufacture, and Distribution of a Line-21 Closed-Captioned Decoder," closed captioning of children's television programs including *Sesame Street*, national news, prime time and syndicated programming, national and regional sports, and local news contributed greatly to providing equal access.

She has also provided similar oversight for video description starting with the design, evaluation, and implementation of the technology to create video description through the present level of Federal support, including projects to provide both video description and captioning for new and emerging technologies.

Jo Ann is a RID-certified interpreter and serves on the Board of Directors of CODA International.