

Interview with Ron Zarro, Video Technology Specialist and DRM for Center Grove High School

Martha:

Hello there and welcome to our podcast. My name is Martha Wells Hammond and I am the ICAM Coordinator of Library Services. I want to say thanks to Chadd Smith, the ICAM Technical Consultant, for setting up our sound equipment. We have traveled to Center Grove High School in Greenwood, Indiana to speak with Ron Zarro, one of our ICAM Digital Rights Managers. I chose Ron for our first podcast of the new school year because I found Ron to be very engaging and energetic and knowledgeable about what he does here at Center Grove High School in a lot of areas. Nice to see you again, Ron.

Ron:

Well, thank you Martha and Chadd. It is a privilege to be invited and speak on your website.

Martha:

Thank you. So let's get to it.

Ron:

Okay.

Martha:

I would like for you to tell us about your position here at Center Grove. What is your title and what are your duties here?

Ron:

Okay. My title I guess would be Video Technology Specialist. I take care of the video services and special projects across the whole corporation. I could be working in the high school or the middle school or for any of the elementary schools. I will take care of streaming video. I take care of special projects for equipment installation, technology equipment installations in the rooms. Then, I also am the liaison between IT and Special Services and looking at special adaptive technologies and the ICAM materials, as you have already mentioned, and any other special needs like that.

Martha:

I just want to say that when Ron became a Digital Rights Manager he was to date the longest DRM in waiting that we had ever experienced. It took him a long time between referral and taking that training. We are so glad you did.

Ron:

You got me.

Martha:

Okay, so Ron because we have been talking and emailing now for a couple years I know that before you came to Center Grove you retired from a 31-year career. Would you please tell us about your previous work?

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Ron:

Sure. Yes, I was 31-years at Eli Lilly and Company. I was in the...my last assignment I was in the technology area, the IT area. I have been in other areas. I have been in video. I have produced and directed the corporate videos. I have been in IT training. I was in our video studio, broadcast studio, kind of like an engineer over all the equipment over three video studios there. Did a lot of things at Lilly and afterwards I wanted to start looking for an assignment. I actually took off a year, but after that I had considered teaching and then this opportunity came up here at the school corporation. I talked to them and they agreed and here I am today.

Martha:

Here you are. Well, from what you just said it is kind of evident what I would like for you to talk about what you were able to bring from Eli Lilly into an educational setting.

Ron:

Yes, okay, that was an interesting adjustment going from corporate world to the world of academia especially at Lilly. Lilly is a highly regulated company regulated by the government so when it came to the IT world and other things there were procedures that had to be followed and spelled out. When you launched a project you had to follow a certain scope and it had to be done a certain way. I found out that schools are not as highly regulated and so it is more open to do things on-the-fly. It can be good. It can be bad. Coming here I just try to bring a little more structure to the piece of my job that I did into my projects. An example, I think my first project they gave me I went and talked to all the people involved and I came back and very corporate like I put a scope document together. Talked about what is the purpose of the project, what is the goal, what are the deliverables, what is the current situation, what is the desired state, what is the future state, how are we going to implement this, timelines, who is involved and what their tasks were going to be. So you can see a document like that kind of bloom away in the school corporation, but...and they said that I didn't need to do such a lengthy process. I let them know that was my short document.

(laughter)

Martha:

That is what I found that is so interesting about your transition from Eli Lilly to the high school is the businesslike approach that you are able to bring to the setting. In talking with you and you have told me of conversations you have had with teachers and such and I just thing that would be a really streamlined and helpful way for people to look at this acquisition of AIM and assistive technology for students if they could take another approach. I am wondering if you can talk a little bit about that.

Ron:

Yes, I have had several in the past maybe a special education teacher would say I need these things or the services would say I need these things since I was the liaison it would usually come across my desk. I would look at it and not that I had the final say, but I had a big voice in an acquisition or in a certain direction. One time a piece came across a teacher was interested in purchasing some equipment and

based on the things that they told me I sent them an email that said the student doesn't need this because this other piece of equipment will work. Immediately the flags went up for everybody and we had to convene in a conference. I said well you only gave me a certain bit of criteria. I said you need to present it like a business case to me...what are the student's needs...so I really like to come at it from a needs approach or a performance based approach. What does the student need and let's list those needs out. Then, technology wise, what is it going to take or what program is necessary to meet each one of those needs. I told the teacher you are asking for A, I might give you an A+ something greater than what you are asking for. I am not here to really be a deterrent I am here to help you and be sure that we get what the child needs. Coming from the business perspective I look at it from that approach.

Martha:

That really is the model that a CCC should follow according to when I was in school that is what we learned. It is what does the student need not what do we have and how can we make that fit that.

Ron:

Yes.

Martha:

Yes.

Ron:

The other thing is once I look at the equipment I am not qualified to assess the student. I might get the technologies available, but then I go to Kathy Stricker here at Center Grove, wonderful Special Education Director, work with her and she can line someone up that can help do the assessment. Visually impaired, for example, a student was having difficulty reading the material so we said we need to get them a laptop. What size screen do we need? So we were able to get several size laptops in. Had the student come in and read the same material on those laptops and we were able to determine the student needed a larger one. We could get that and make it available for him.

Martha:

Were you able to get that equipment from the PATINS Project?

Ron:

I haven't reached out to that source yet for equipment.

Martha:

You can borrow from them. All of the regional coordinators have lending libraries so you can take something for six weeks or something and try it out with the students and see if it is going to work before you make a purchasing decision.

Ron:

Okay, great. Watch out I will be down there.

(laughter)

Martha:

Last year at the PATINS Tech Expo you encountered a piece of technology called the Intel Reader.

Ron:

Yes.

Martha:

I know that people love it and people hate it. You are one of the people that actually love that piece of technology. I wonder if you can tell us why you were drawn to that and how you have used it here in your school.

Ron:

Okay. We have...yes, went to the conference and I always look at all the vendors, see what they have and I was familiar with some of the students that we had here. We had some visually impaired students, some even had...one of the students even had a cane here in the school. Some are more severe than others. I saw this device and I was pretty interested in it how it could immediately take a picture of text. The device could then read it back to you. There wasn't a lot of manipulation. Click and then once it finishes processing you press one other button and it reads it back. I was really intrigued by this, but then I also found out it did other things that might help more than just vision impaired students. There are some that have some reading disabilities. First I got a demo model and circulated it through a couple of teachers and then after the demo model we determined there was some interest here. Then, we made a purchase of a few and I got them in the hands of the proper teachers. One of the interesting things we got it to do is it not only reads the text back it also reads an MP3 file. I hope it doesn't sound like a commercial for the Intel Reader, but it also creates an OPF file and what is a wonderful thing about the OPF file is maybe most of your listeners know is that I now can use Read:OutLoud and I can simply plug the device into a computer and transfer the file over. We had one of the middle school students using Read:OutLoud with a custom made book that was not available as an eBook. I talked to the teacher and the teacher said the student was given options, do you want to read or do you want to do this other task today. They didn't want to do either one, but when we started then creating these books with the Intel Reader the student would say will I be able to do that today so there was motivation. They were wanting to do it. The reading was starting to improve. Unfortunately the year ended so it will be interesting to see how the student comes back this fall.

Martha:

Excellent. Very good. You told me, also, about something very exciting that is going to happen at the high school this fall.

Ron:

Yes.

Martha:

Why don't you tell us about that? It is happening in several other schools...

Ron:

Yes, one of the trends. Center Grove has been very fortunate in that the high school students this fall, every high school student will be assigned an iPad and since I am wearing that IT liaison then the challenge is getting the ICAM books for those students onto the iPad. Those are going to be some of the challenges that we have that are coming around the corner.

Martha:

Do you have a view yet of how this is going to change the teaching/learning environment?

Ron:

Wow. That would be interesting to see. These are just devices you know. How people learn is still the same. So if I am learning with a flash card or an electronic flash card it is still the same process. Maybe it makes it a little more engaging I suppose or maybe a little more fun from the perspective of the student, but really you are using a lot of the same techniques. Many of them...I mean some of the studies have shown that some of the electronic apps do work well, but sometimes some of the hardcopy stuff works well also.

Martha:

I think it is generational.

Ron:

It is and even for the teachers too.

Martha:

Yes.

Ron:

Sometimes there are teachers that don't absorb it so well.

Martha:

That is one thing that I really appreciate about Center Grove it is like the center of technology. I know you say you are just the tech guy, but you are responsible for a lot of this.

Ron:

Now our IT Director, Julie Bohnenkamp.

Martha:

Okay.

Ron:

She is a ... we are very fortunate to have her in the school district. She has a great IT vision.

Martha:

So the next thing that is coming up is the MediaCAST. The MediaCAST.

Ron:

Yes, MediaCAST. I mentioned I take care of streaming services here. We have a streaming media server here. The model of the past has been teachers have VHS tapes and DVDs and they take each individual one and show it in the classroom. Then one grade school is unable to share that material with another grade school because it is residing in their library. Well, MediaCAST does several things. One is it allows us to take our existing VHS tapes and DVDs and encode them or digitize the material and put them up on the server. Then, teachers can check them out. If we have one VHS tape only one person can check it out electronically. They can look at those things right from their classroom. They do not have to go down to the media center they just go straight to their computer, go to the MediaCAST server, search for the video and they can begin playing it. It is really pretty nice. They can also use it to stream live presentations so maybe a Christmas program, maybe there is going to be overflow the gym doesn't hold everybody now we can migrate parents into the overflow rooms and show the event live by hooking a camera to it.

Martha:

That is excellent. Very good. Okay, now I want to talk on a more personal note.

Ron:

Okay.

Martha:

I know that you and I in a previous conversation had talked about your son, Zach.

Ron:

Yes.

Martha:

He is a student here at Center Grove.

Ron:

Yes.

Martha:

I would like for you to introduce Zach.

Ron:

Okay. Zachery. Hello Zach. He just turned 17-years-old. He is a special needs boy. He is more low functioning. He falls in that category kind of stumps the neurologist every...to look at him he looks like a typical child, but it is quite obvious. He is probably functioning about a 3-year-old level. He is a good little guy. Great kid. Being here in the school system gives me a chance to check up on him and see how he is doing. On the other hand it also gives me a chance to advocate for him and check up on him and make sure the school corporation, the teachers and the aides are doing the things that are best for him too. So it kind of works both ways. I don't hesitate popping into the classroom and smiling and waving or just going by. Sometimes I sit down and have lunch with him. So Zach is a pretty good kid. He has been in the school corporation for a number of years. It is just a wonderful thing. That was the reason I wanted to come to the school so that I would have the same time off that he would have. It does help the family environment at home. Zach can't manage by himself so somebody has to be with him when he is home.

Martha:

Certainly.

Ron:

So this is a perfect job.

Martha:

So by helping your family then you are helping other families by bringing your expertise and your vision. It sounds like Zach actually inspires you to make good decisions for the other students.

Ron:

Yes. Well, that too and something I hadn't told you about is we have a Parent Advisory Committee just for Center Grove. Some of the special education parents have been invited and we come together periodically about the things we like, about the things we don't like. It is open to talk about anything good and bad because the goal is to make things better for all of the students here, but you have to be your own advocate. Parents have got to be their own advocate. You would think okay here I am working in the school corporation you think everything would just go right along with the IEP and other things, but that is a perfect world and we don't live in a perfect world. Parents need to get in there and check out and make sure things are going right.

Martha:

Great advice. Ron, thank you so much for talking with us today. I hope that you have given a lot of information to people. If you need to speak with Ron about any of the subjects he brought up I think he might welcome an email.

Ron:

That would be fine.

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Martha:

He can maybe steer you in the right direction. Remember that your PATINS Regional Coordinator here in Center Grove is Jeff Bond. He also can be of assistance to you. For today, Ron, we just really appreciate that you spent so much time with us to tell us your stories and it has been fascinating.

Ron:

Okay. Thank you very much. My pleasure.