

CHARACTER STUDY | COREY KILGANNON



TODD HEISLER/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Rosemary Romano, 79, who is visually impaired, works at Helen Keller Services for the Blind.

Inspiring by Example

"IT'S LIKE THE BLIND leading the blind," Rosemary Romano, 79, said folding up her cane. "But with a positive connotation."

Ms. Romano, who is blind, has been leading blind students through life and work lessons for 54 years.

As an instructor of typing and assistive technology at Helen Keller Services for the Blind in Downtown Brooklyn, she dispenses tricks and tips, such as where to find the hyphen on a computer keyboard — the key to the right of the zero, best hit with your right pinkie — or what keystroke will locate a lost cursor.

But more than touch-typing, basic Braille and clerical skills, Ms. Romano's real lessons come from the way she lives her life and leads by example.

"The main thing I bring to the table is that the students see how I function, and getting them to realize they can have a life again," said Ms. Romano, whose determination to maintain a fiercely independent life includes living on her own in a meticulously neat and impressively decorated apartment in Howard Beach, Queens, and commuting by public transportation.

She has inspired generations of blind students to become office workers, teachers and lawyers, and has delayed retiring for years because, she said, "I still had something to bring to the table."

But this month at work is her last, and even as she wraps up lessons with her students, she stays firm with them. She has never coddled.

"You're not doing them any good by going

The Particulars

Name Rosemary Romano

Age 79

Who she is An instructor for the blind who herself is blind.

Where she's from Howard Beach, Queens

Telling detail "I've battled my whole life to get people to accept blind people for who they are."

easy on them," said Ms. Romano, who summons the style of Anne Sullivan, the indefatigable instructor of Helen Keller, to be a sensitive but stern taskmaster.

Still, she said, she can teach her students how to function, but she cannot shape them as people.

"If you were a big-mouthed jerk before, you'll be a big-mouthed jerk after," she said. "If you had some class before, you'll likely still have class."

Just then, Chaya Berger, 30, a visually impaired student at Helen Keller, arrived for a typing lesson with Ms. Romano.

"I've never met anyone like her before," said Ms. Berger, a mother and part-time secretary from Borough Park, Brooklyn.

Ms. Romano brushed off the compliment, saying, "I've had 54 years of practice."

Another instructor, at an adjacent training space, Horace Smith, 52, praised Ms. Romano.

"Some students who come from enclosed worlds and feel sorry for themselves, they only have to meet Rose once and they realize she takes none of that nonsense," he said.

Ms. Romano moved around the office

with a defiant matter-of-factness to match her personality, often dispensing with her cane.

"I'm famous for leaving my cane everywhere — when anyone finds a cane around here, they know it's mine," said Ms. Romano, adding that she started working at the school in the early 1960s as a switchboard operator, but quickly became an instructor.

"I made \$50 a week, but I probably would have done it for nothing," she said. "A lot of blind people were kept in the background, at that time, but I wanted to work."

She met her husband, Frank Romano, at the school. He was an administrator and also blind. As a couple, they developed homemaking methods. To match clothes, she would sew little Braille labels into his suits and shirts as color indicators. She matched her own clothes by keeping them organized, separating prints and solids.

Since her husband's death almost 20 years ago, Ms. Romano has drawn on the toughness she learned growing up in the East New York section of Brooklyn.

An avid Brooklyn Dodgers fan, she went often to Ebbets Field, using a little radio to follow the action. She cheered for her hero, Pee Wee Reese, at shortstop, and drank in the aroma of hot dogs and beer, and the surly sounds from the stands.

"You could feel the energy, the thrill of being there," said Ms. Romano, adding that while living at the New York Institute for the Blind in the Bronx, she would listen to games on the radio.

When the New York Giants' Bobby Thomson crushed the Dodgers with his pennant-winning home run in 1951, "My mother called the school to see if I was O.K.," she recalled.

Her father, Anthony Marcello, owned the Cactus pool room on Rockaway Avenue in East New York, which at the time was a heavily Italian enclave.

"The Mafia guys, when something was about to erupt, they'd tell my father, 'Close up and go home,'" she recalled. "It was part of living there. You didn't ask questions."

Her father was a sharp dresser who impressed that quality on his three children. He held Rosemary to the same strict standards as her siblings, which instilled a sense of confident normalcy.

"To this day, I wouldn't step outside without being put together," said Ms. Romano, who for years wore suits to work and always looked immaculate, down to her makeup.

Weekends are still for shopping and manicures.

"Some people go to Mass; I go to the beauty parlor," she said. "The women in there used to treat me like a little glass ornament."

"It took years to get them to understand I was a regular person with the same likes and dislikes as anyone else."

Enough talk. It was time for another lesson.

"Now," she said. "Where did I put my cane?"