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Captioner's job lands her a ticket to inauguration ball

BY MARTINA BEATTY • MBEATTY@RGJ.COM • JANUARY 25, 2009

One Reno resident's valuable expertise was her ticket to Washington, D.C., during last week's inauguration festivities.

Denise Phipps was invited to attend the Southern States Inaugural Ball on Tuesday at the National Guard Armory so that she could provide real-time captioning -- which allows deaf and hard of hearing people to follow along with speeches, lectures or even songs they cannot hear.

Captioners capture in machine shorthand every word that is being said on a stenographer's machine, which is then translated by computer software back into English.

"Captioning is performed by a highly skilled court reporter," Phipps said. "I have been tested up to 260 wpm, but many times sportscasters go upwards of 320 wpm. President Obama and Biden speak very slowly, so they are a captioner's dream."

A court reporter since 1985, Phipps founded Captions Unlimited in Reno in 1996.

"I provide these services on-site, like at the inauguration balls, or remotely over the Internet," she said. "I've captioned live President George W. Bush, when he was here in Reno speaking before the American Legion folks, and then 11 years prior, in 1996, I captioned his mother, Barbara Bush. She was at a forum, speaking along with General Colin Powell, former (Israeli) Prime Minister Shimon Peres. I captioned Rich Little at this same event."

Other notable people she's transcribed are golf pro Tiger Woods and radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh in a phone conversation with former President George W. Bush.

For the Southern States Inaugural Ball, Phipps was notified by Lorraine Carter with Caption Reporters, a captioning company in Maryland. That company had received a last-minute call to provide eight on-site captioners.

There were 10 official inaugural balls, and each had its own captioner, she said.