

# GOTLIAM

MAY 2007

DEEP DISH SWEET CHARITY



## Read & Right

It's time New Yorkers all got on the same page and supported Literacy Partners!

by Liz Smith

SOMETIMES AN IMPORTANT EVENT happens in your life without your being aware of it. I was working on WNBC's *Live at Five* 25 years ago when my TV mate Carol Jenkins asked me to help her get Lena Horne for a Literacy Volunteers (LV) fundraiser. (I'd bragged about knowing Horne really well.)

Of course she turned down the request and I felt embarrassed in front of the dedicated Ms. Jenkins, so I feigned interest in the charity and went, reluctantly, with her to a meeting. There, a great-looking Madison Avenue-type guy stood up and said he'd somehow gotten out of high school without knowing how to read or write. He'd had his wife read newspapers to him. He was faking it through business and life. Then he went to LV, and now he was reading Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. His life had totally changed.

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I was hooked. It just hadn't occurred to me that in New York, of all places, there were adults who couldn't read or write at the fifth-grade level. It also hadn't occurred to me in my lucky, productive life that I owed anything to the community I enjoyed so much. But I got the message and started working hard for literacy. I remember that in our first event we raised \$10,000. I thought that was a miracle.

As time went on, I was joined by my pals Arnold Scaasi and Parker Ladd; we brought in



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: James Brady, Sir Howard Stringer, Arnold Scaasi, and Parker Ladd; Michael Cunningham, Augusten Burroughs, Rich Prestia, Mayor Michael Bloomberg, Wallace Murray, and Nora Ephron; and Barbara Walters, all at the annual An Evening of Readings at Lincoln Center.

some of the rich and famous and changed our name to Literacy Partners. We had helpful backing and encouragement from Barbara Walters, Joan Ganz Cooney, Pete Peterson, Lesley Stahl, Peter Jennings, Diane Sawyer, Mike Nichols, and Barry Diller... I could go on and on. Sometimes it was an uphill battle. Teaching adults to read was difficult; we couldn't put them in classes—they had to learn face-to-face, head-to-head, and they usually had to meet with their tutors after a hard day's work.

But we attacked the problem of more than one million adults in New York who can't read a medicine bottle or an address, let alone a book. We designed the Liz Smith Fund (no, calling it that wasn't my idea), which began to collect money for emergencies or for future day-to-day "keeping on" in case fundraising fell off, or if perhaps we wanted to buy a building and provide daycare and a central place for our students to meet. We were told we'd be lucky to raise \$1 million for this fund; today we have \$5 million, and we're forging ahead to make that grow and grow.

These days we do an annual gala at Lincoln Center, where well-known authors read from their works. We've lured the likes of Norman Mailer, Hillary Clinton, Kurt Vonnegut, Dominick Dunne, Pat Conroy, Edna O'Brien, Mary Higgins Clark, Barbara Taylor Bradford, Barbara Bush, Oprah Winfrey, and a clutch of distinguished poet

laureates of the US. Sometimes we make as much as \$1 million from these efforts. Our work has expanded into new areas—we even began a family branch to encourage parents to read to, and with, their children.

On May 7 we'll be presenting an astonishing program with the great Vanessa Redgrave, who'll be reading from the works of Joan Didion; everybody's favorite "lady detective" writer, Alexander McCall Smith; and Peter Morgan, the man who wrote the screenplays of *The Queen* and *The Last King of Scotland* and the play *Frost/Nixon* all in one year. We're also honoring the Hearst Corporation's dynamic Cathie Black, who's helped us so much.

My favorite part of Literacy Partners? The students who've been taught one-on-one by generous volunteers. Each year they stand up and read us what they've written about the glory, the mystery, the magic of at last being able to read. They're our real heroes and heroines!

*Literacy Partners' An Evening of Readings, including a gala dinner dance, will be held on May 7 at the New York State Theater Grand Promenade at Lincoln Center, Columbus Avenue at 63rd Street. For tickets, call 212-573-6933. For more information, call Literacy Partners at 646-237-0122, or visit [literacypartners.org](http://literacypartners.org).*