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Opening a Window to the World:

By Joan Downs, Volunteer Tutor, PETER, Inc. Pre-GED Center and winner of the 2007 Volunteer of the Year Award

"I don't read good," he mumbles, eyes lowered. "Then you've come to the right place," she assures him. "It's my job to teach you to read." Smiles all around. "But it's up to you to come to class, pay attention, and do all your assignments." He nods solemnly and they shake on it, neither one fully aware how hard what she is asking of him will be.

Here is my philosophy of teaching literacy: Speech is the most important skill a student brings to the table. If you can talk, you can learn to read.

I am stunned when I start tutoring at New York Life in September 2003. Seven of 14 students in the ABE class can't recite the alphabet. One never spent a day in school. Before learning can begin, I must build trust, coaxing students to talk while patiently listening. Three months elapse before everyone can print the alphabet, upper and lower case, along with a word for each letter. It takes 50 minutes, but in the end we're all buoyed in collective triumph.

The dedication of ABE students is humbling. I've never seen people so passionate to learn. They hang on every word; do whatever you ask - no complaints. We're not talking the 3R's here as much as the 3C's - Courage, Character, and Commitment. It's thrilling when they discover poems

by Langston Hughes and Billy Collins; stories by Mark Twain and Washington Irving; and novels by Ernest Hemingway and Sandra Cisneros. Along with reading, writing, and math, they study for driver's license and citizenship tests, create budgets, resumes; write letters to President Bush about their concerns.

Last fall I began teaching Pre-GED students. Instead of learning to read, Pre-GED students read to learn. The adult new readers are eager to prove themselves to their tutors; Pre-GED students expect you to prove yourself to them. They swagger. Praternaturally suspicious, they're always testing. ("Are you sure a pronoun is related to a noun, I never heard that one before!" Elaine challenges.) They take turns playing Class Comedian, keeping you on your

toes. Make no mistake: They're a motivated and ambitious bunch and they make rapid progress.

Reading opens a window on the world. It's a blessing to be able to make that kind of difference in someone's life. As you forge strong bonds through a shared purpose, giving of yourself makes you a better person. Not a day passes that I don't think about my students, as my family and friends will attest. I worry when they struggle academically and personally, I rejoice at their successes.

In the serenity of the garden at the Rodin Museum in Paris when I am on holiday, I think of Evelyn, who practices reading on the subway and goes to Prospect Park to paint pictures. She would really like it here.



Joan Downs and students.

In Their Own Words

"As I continue my studies, I see things in a more positive way. I see more doors opening for me in the future."

Darrell S. Time, Inc.

"The experience of coming to school: at first it was kind of hard thinking of how it would be and how the teacher would be. But the first teacher I had was so nice and she made you feel so good about yourself that you had a good feeling about school. It's hard because you have to put your brain to work again. Now I feel so good about myself because the people and teachers are great"

Marcelina, Time-Pre-GED

From the Executive Director



Susan A. McLean

They are the diners who ask the waiter to read the menu because "I forgot my glasses."

They are the patients who call back to have the doctor's instructions repeated because "I lost the paper you gave me."

They are America's functionally illiterate adults. They cannot read above the fifth grade level. A many cannot read at all. There are 100 million variations on these two scenarios - one for each American now struggling daily to conceal and compensate for this critical gap in ability to participate fully in society.

Helping this sizeable slice of our population achieve literacy is not an act of pity, charity, or another do-good social entitlement program. It is a necessary investment in America's competitiveness and future - and one certain to pay back a dividend.

Lifting these 100 million people to literacy is essential because, in addition to being the diners and patients who hide their disability, they are also:

- The unemployed but willing-to-work who do not get hired because they can't fill out the application or lack the basic skills required.
- The employed but unable-to-read who, despite their best efforts, invisibly sap their employers' productivity.

• The medically under-informed patients who have become sicker because of their literacy gap, placing further strain on health care financing.

• The parents who cannot help their fourth-grader do their homework, thus increasing the odds that the cycle of illiteracy, under-preparedness, unemployment and poverty will stain the next generation.

We have just passed the season of holidays and thankfulness and we put a great of effort into the annual appeal - appealing to the goodness in everyone's heart and talking about ways to help these 100 million Americans. But that shouldn't even be necessary. As a matter of cold, objective national self-interest, investing in adult literacy is a no-brainer.

What price do we pay for illiteracy?

American businesses lose over \$70 billion annually in productivity due to employees' lack of basic literacy. It's estimated that up to one in five American workers cannot read simple instructions, add and subtract, write a letter, or perform other basic communication tasks. Even those who do meet minimal requirements for their ground-level jobs are held back from advancing to higher levels, where they could benefit their employers more significantly.

The health care system is crushed with an additional \$73 billion in costs because low-literacy patients who cannot follow medical instructions adequately are more likely to become sicker, they know significantly less about their condition, and doctors communicate with them less effectively, than with the literate sick. Annual health care costs for low-literate patients are four times greater than those for the population at large.

What would it take to make the change?

The cost, on average, is \$1,000 per year to teach an adult to learn to read and proficiency can be gained in four years or less. An incredible 71% of adults served in literacy programs are between the age of 19 and 44 - the core of the working and parenting population. It is also vitally important to note that the Federal Office of Management and Budget has rated only 4 of 86 national programs to be effective - adult literacy is rated "effective" - the highest performance rating.

And finally, for every \$1 invested in adult literacy, \$4 is returned to the community.

The remarkable thing about adult illiteracy is that it is one of our most readily cured crises. Much attention has been riveted in recent years on the No Child Left Behind Act. Devoting resources and energy to educating our young is of course vital to the national interest. But it is curious that, amid all the public discussion of No Child Left Behind, there has been precious little talk about the ramifications of leaving 100 million adults behind while the rest of our nation is poised for productivity and prosperity.

It is time for a national commitment to low-reading adults - a policy agenda that recognizes reading as a core competency and necessary element in individual and societal well-being. Surely, if we can work harder to teach our children to read, write and take part in their world, we can do the same for their mothers and fathers. America's ability to sustain its global economic leadership ultimately hangs in the balance.

Susan A. McLean

Staff Profile:

Danilo Minnick - Director of Volunteer and Student Recruitment



Danilo Minnick

Danilo Minnick has always tried to make the world a better place. As a member of the Peace Corps, he helped West African artisans develop a business cooperative, and he worked with Florida migrants and immigrants as a volunteer in the VISTA antipoverty program. His lifelong commitment to the spirit and power of volunteerism has since turned closer to home - to the important task of giving countless adult New Yorkers the gift of literacy. With 13 years of volunteer activism on his resume, Danilo has spent the last five years at Literacy Partners and now serves as our Director of

Volunteer Services and Student Recruitment. Responsible for attracting, training and retaining the volunteer tutors who are Literacy Partners lifeblood, Danilo is the newest member of our organization's senior staff.

Danilo has significantly strengthened the recruitment and retention of both volunteers and students. "Because of the demanding 20 hour training process, our volunteers need to be dedicated to the cause and committed to volunteering at Literacy Partners for the long run," he says. Many volunteers come from corporate backgrounds, and he has fine-tuned the volunteer training program to create an atmosphere and structure in which they feel at home. Up to 150 volunteers each year take part in tutoring at Literacy Partners.

While he appreciates the enthusiastic feedback we receive from our volunteers, Danilo is especially proud of one group: former Literacy Partners students who have now themselves become tutors. "It is truly inspirational," he says, "to watch some of our students who have experienced success through our programs come back as volunteers

to help others achieve their academic goals."

In addition to helping students excel, Danilo has contributed to the organization's success. He played an important role in Literacy Partners achieving the designation as the only nationally accredited adult literacy program serving New York City.

Thoroughly dedicated to volunteerism, Danilo has served on the Board of Directors of the New York Association for Volunteer Administration, and belongs to local and national Returned Peace Corps Volunteer associations.

LITERACY PARTNERS AN EVENING OF READINGS

WITH Arnold Scaasi Liz Smith Parker Ladd AND A J Jacobs Ann Patchett Azar Nafisi

HONORING David and Julia Koch

Save the date

Monday, May 12, 2008
New York State Theater
Six thirty cocktails
Seven o'clock readings
immediately following
Gala Dinner Dance
Black Tie
For more Information call
Anita Hall 212.573.6933

Readings Journal.

For additional information regarding Literati or for an appointment to discuss your planned giving options, please contact David Nathanson, Director of Finance at 646.237.0123 or send an email to: davidn@literacypartners.org

"My gratitude goes out to all the teachers and tutors at Literacy Partners who volunteered their time to enhance our minds for a better tomorrow and a brighter future."

Ruben C., New York Life

"I had relinquished my aspiration of ever obtaining a High School diploma. Literacy Partners was essential in fulfilling my dream. My teacher has been paramount in reaching my goal. She is a wonderful, patient teacher who will continue to explain a subject until everyone in the class has understood the theme. I am unstoppable now. Thank you Literacy Partners."

Christina S., Sonny Sloan (2006)

LITERATI

Join an Exclusive Society for Planned Givers Only

Literati is an association existing exclusively to recognize and encourage individuals making planned gifts to Literacy Partners programs. As a member, you will join a distinguished group of individuals and couples who have signaled their strong belief in the promise of literacy and our vision of a world made just and whole through the fundamental ability to comprehend the written word.

Any planned gift qualifies the donor for Literati membership, including:

- A confirmed bequest in your will

or living trust agreement

- Establishing a charitable gift annuity
- Entering into a charitable remainder trust arrangement
- Naming Literacy Partners as a beneficiary of a life insurance policy, retirement plan, deposit account, or similar fund
- Endowing a fund to meet the future needs of those served by Literacy Partners

By becoming a member of Literati, you will be our guest at an annual luncheon honoring Literati members, receive recognition on our website, in our newsletters, in our annual report, and in the Gala Evening of

what we want to do and that we provide a clear picture to the Board of Directors as to how we will achieve our targets.

DC: I'm involved in a couple of committees but most of my work has been with the Finance Committee. Generally speaking, the best thing the Finance Committee can do is listen to (Chair of Finance) John Josephson who has provided wonderful guidance. From a long-term planning point of view, the Finance Committee holds the custodial responsibility for the endowment. The command control over the Liz Smith Endowment has been handled excellently.

I'm also a member of the Executive Committee. The purpose of the Executive Committee is to determine the most important and pressing concerns to present to the Board of Directors in addition to ensuring that all committees are making progress.

Please share some of your personal reasons for volunteering for the Board:

SR: I grew up on the other end of service in the projects of West Harlem. There were many of types of programs available to people in my community and it was always great when an organization was sensitive to the needs of the people in the community. From that perspective, I was aware that I wanted to be a person who worked with agencies that provided services to which people wouldn't otherwise have access.

With that in mind, it's important that our literacy program be a program sensitive in its outreach so that people will not be embarrassed to sign up for it.

DC: I grew up with a great love of books. My parents were always reading and some of my favorite childhood memories are of reading with my mother. I grew up surrounded by books and couldn't imagine people being deprived the pleasure of reading. In my late 20's, when I was single and had spare time, I looked in the phone book under "L" for Literacy and came across Literacy Volunteers of New York City. I started out as a tutor at the McGraw Hill site and Literacy Partners hasn't been able to get rid of me since.

What would you like to see for the future of Literacy Partners?

SR: We need stable funding to be able to follow through on the needs that have been identified in the strategic plan. For example, student participation is greater if the literacy program is taking place in the community in which it is needed and students do not have to travel long distances to obtain service. So, we're not just aiming to increase the number of locations but to increase the participation in the communities where the programs are needed.

DC: Mainly, I'd love for the organization to grow to the point where we put ourselves out of business because we are no longer needed.

Writers for Readers

- Margaret Atwood
David Baldacci
John Berendt
Amy Bloom
Judy Blume
Terrence Brooks
Tom Brokaw
Rita Mae Brown
Sandra Brown
Carol Higgins Clark
Mary Higgins Clark
William Collins
Michael Connelly
Patricia Cornwell
Michael Crichton
Don DeLillo
Dominick Dunne
Nora Ephron
Clarissa Pinkola Estés
Tina S. Flaherty
Dorothea Benton Frank
Barbara Goldsmith
John Grisham
Gale Hayman
Rosellen Brown Hoffman
Ron Howard
Susan Isaacs
John Jakes
Sue Monk Kidd
Stephen King
Stephen Lauder
Evelyn Lauder
Laurence A. Leamer
Elmore Leonard
Peter Mayle
David McCullough
Brad Meltzer
Judith McNaught
Ruth Halsey North
Lissa Quindlen
Lisa See
Anita Shreve
Anne Rivers Siddons
Danielle Steel
Martha Stewart
R.L. Stine
Judith Thurman
Andrew Tobias
Anonymous

Board Talk

This edition of Board Talk seems particularly appropriate given that the theme of the newsletter is volunteerism and the individuals that comprise LPI's governing body do so as volunteers. For this edition, we have chosen Sonia Reese, Executive Director of Community Impact at Columbia University and Drew Collier, Principal, The Dashrock Group.

What is the Board's role in getting the job done?

SR: Our mission is to provide good, proper legal oversight as well as to make sure that we are carrying out the mission and vision of the organization.

DC: The Board's main role is to make sure that the executive team is the right team for the mission and then aide and assist the executive team with that mission. We assist in putting together an executive and management team that will help the organization realize its goals. The second and most important task is fund-raising. It's the Board's role to provide a governance framework demonstrating that we are spending our money wisely and raising it voluminously.

Please talk about your committee and the work it entails.

SR: I currently chair the Program Committee which relates to the direct service aspect of the organization. The mission of the Program Committee is to ensure that we create a strong program that is in line with



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Everyone deserves a chance to read.

