



Spring 2009

# Literacy Partners update

212.725.9200  
www.literacypartners.org

Everyone deserves a chance to read.

## An Empowering Endeavor

By Tonia Lovejoy – Teacher

*English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)*

Two months after I started teaching ESOL for Literacy Partners a student named Ceesay Tanja from Gambia entered the class. Ceesay was not one of the students who was new to English class. She had been taking English classes through Literacy Partners for several years off and on.

Not unlike many of the other students in the class from West Africa, Ceesay came to the United States at a very young age to marry her husband. The day she arrived in New York City she was married. She did not come with the skills needed to find a job or to work. It was not expected that she would learn to read or write either. Yet, she found the time over the years and between kids to attend free English classes throughout the city, mostly without her husband's knowledge.

She quickly became a role model in our class, often sharing her humbling story of learning to speak, read, and write English in the United States. The other students looked up to her, as if her achievements gave them

faith in the possibility of their own success. When the Student Reading Celebration came along in June, Ceesay was eager to write her story. She entitled it "Coming to America" and I recommended that she read it at the Celebration.

On the night of the Student Reading, Ceesay was nervous. I was nervous too. Reading the story in class the week earlier had been an emotional experience. The last line, a thought of her home and family in Gambia, manifested itself into something painfully real when read aloud. She missed them terribly and was sure to falter reading the lines again. I was hoping she would do well and also that I wouldn't cry this time.

I sat in the front center row so I could see her, and so she could see me smiling back at her. As soon as she sat on the stage I began to choke down tears. She was shaking. I felt weak. I could not see through my own tears as she stood on stage and used English, her English, fought for and won, to express herself. At the same point in the piece she



Ceesay Tanja

began to stumble. The words on the page written in her hand, then spoken through her lips, shook her powerfully. "I miss my family, my brothers, my sisters, my mother and my father. I miss my country." Tears streamed down her face as she read, but with the support of the audience and her fellow readers on stage clapping and cheering her on, she found the strength to finish.

After the reading Ceesay was beaming proud. The public reading had been an empowering endeavor. She talked about the other students from Adult Basic Education and GED classes and eagerly set her goal to get her GED someday. A fellow classmate, shy and new, said that she hoped to read at next year's celebration just like Ceesay had.

I never felt so proud of someone in my whole life.

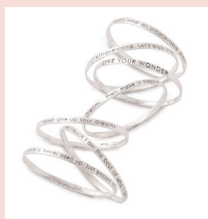
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## CAROLEE to Benefit Literacy Partners with Authors Jewelry Collection



Leading fashion jewelry company CAROLEE will donate 10% of retail sales to **Literacy Partners** from the **Authors Collection Words to Live By Sterling Sentiments®** bangles – engraved with quotes from *Danielle Steel, Joyce Carol Oates, Elizabeth Gilbert, Marisha Pessl, Plum Sykes, Anisha Lakhani* and *Cecelia Ahern!* Gift boxed and engraved with the author's signature. \$100 each. Bangles are on sale through Bloomingdale's and Lord & Taylor and can also be purchased at [www.CAROLEE.com](http://www.CAROLEE.com).

# THE POWER OF THE WRITTEN WORD

Susan A. McLean, *Executive Director*



*Susan A. McLean*

**W**e often hear about the power of the written word – it's not just a sound or a symbol. Words give us strength and power to express, communicate, visualize and create. I cannot imagine the struggle to survive in a world without knowing how to read. I certainly cannot imagine how powerless, sad and anxious I would be in that world.

On a daily basis, hundreds of thousands of men and women in our city fake their way through everyday tasks without reading. At restaurants, they guess what's on the menu and order a hamburger, chicken soup or salad – or point to someone else's plate at the next table and ask for "what he's having." They hide their illiteracy secret from their husbands, wives and children – often for decades. They pretend to forget their glasses, and say that they were out of town or too busy to open the mail asking someone else to do it for them. They fake an injury and claim they are unable to write.

To be illiterate in New York – or anywhere for that matter – is to be unsafe, uncomfortable and unprotected. For the illiterate, despair and defeat serve as daily fare. Can we truly relate to the silent humiliation, the quiet desperation that can't be expressed or the hundreds

of ways that those who cannot read struggle in shame to keep their secret? For millions the struggle out of illiteracy is unfortunately still a part of New York's story.

Literacy Partners is here to help, and each year we do just that for thousands of New Yorkers. We cannot do it alone though, we need your support now more than ever to help the thousands of New Yorkers who have lost their jobs and are waiting for a chance to learn how to read. I hope you can find it in your heart to make an extra donation, volunteer, or support our organization by spreading the word to your friends, colleagues and family members.

A handwritten signature in red ink that reads "Susan A. McLean".

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## Planned Giving: *When There's a Will, There's a Way!*

**C**haritable bequests are gifts made to charity through your will or living trust. A bequest is a great opportunity to support the work of Literacy Partners. It is a living legacy of your compassion and desire to teach illiterate New Yorkers how to read.

### ***The importance of a valid will.***

By most reports, more than half of Americans die without a valid will. The result is that major decisions about their property and their loved ones are made by the state. Without a will, an estate may pay more in state and federal estate taxes, thus reducing the amount available to loved ones and charities. Creating a simple will or revising an existing one is neither necessarily expensive nor time-consuming and the benefits are numerous. A well-crafted will directs to whom, how, and when assets are to be distributed and employs tax-savings measures to preserve as much of an estate as possible.

Including a gift to Literacy Partners in your will (a "charitable bequest") may enable you to make a more significant gift than may be possible during your lifetime.

### ***Bequests do not reduce current assets.***

Some supporters of Literacy Partners want to make a

greater effort, but are not in a position to do so right now. A gift by will or living trust means that you have all of your assets available for any need that may arise. A bequest means that you make a gift when you no longer need to have funds available.

### ***Bequests can be made after taking care of family.***

Family always comes first. You can remember Literacy Partners by including a percentage of the remainder of your estate or trust after providing for your family.

### ***Your charitable bequest***

Bequests allow you to distribute your assets to Literacy Partners in a manner most appropriate to your circumstances. You can specify a dollar amount or a percentage of the estate. Your bequest to Literacy Partners can be unrestricted or restricted to a specified purpose, for example to help fund our Adult Basic Education program or to name a learning center.

For information on making a bequest, including suggested language, please contact David Nathanson, Director of Finance at (646) 237-0123 or davidn@literacypartners.org.

We are here to help you make a difference for Literacy Partners.

## STAFF PROFILE: Alexa Bonilla, Director of Education



Alexa Bonilla

For Alexa Bonilla, finding motivation and inspiration in her work is easy. She simply looks to the commitment that Literacy Partners has made to its students. "It's not just a job, it's an investment," she says. "Everyone from senior staff to teachers to volunteers is invested in what we do."

Alexa has held a number of positions during her six years at Literacy Partners and each one has added to the value and growth of the organization. In her current role as Director of Education, Alexa works one-on-one with teachers, problem solving and providing leadership. Her managerial style comes from her experience teaching in the classroom which ultimately gives her insight and helps her determine what is feasible in the classroom and what isn't. Alexa firmly believes that student success weighs heavily on a teacher's investment in the program. Recognizing this, Alexa has developed a rapport with teachers, volunteers and others which enables her to connect with them while keeping her "ear close to the ground." "Having worked as a former teacher and now as Director of Education helps me bridge the gap from day-to-day teaching experiences to the overall growth and success of the organization," explains Alexa.

Ironically, teaching wasn't her first career choice. As a sophomore engineering major at Cornell University, Alexa was certain that a career rooted in a quantitative discipline was her life's path. A trip to a manufacturing company where students followed engineers for a day, however, encouraged Alexa to make a change that would take her down a very different career path. After that class field trip, Alexa realized that an engineering degree would not put her face-to-face with the community and allow her to give back the way she wanted. She decided to give into her passion for reading and literature and changed her major to English and education. Since making that change Alexa has devoted herself to giving back to her community and to helping others advance through education and literacy, first as an elementary school teacher and later through her work with Literacy Partners. She also serves as a Community Representative for the board of the Delegate Agency Policy Committee (DAPC) in the early childhood Head Start Program at the Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation (WHEDCo).

In many ways Alexa's commitment to education and literacy has come full circle. She is cognizant of this as she assumes yet another role watching and helping her five year old daughter go through the process of learning to read. "It's a nice connection," notes Alexa.

## An Evening of Readings Gala Kick-Off Party at Michael's Restaurant



Christopher Buckley, Marie Brenner, Barbara Goldsmith, Liz Smith, Nina Rennert Davidson and Mitchell Davidson

Guests such as Paula Zahn, Mary Higgins Clark, Lesley Stahl, Gay Talese, Jerry Della Femina, and Gayle King joined Literacy Partners Honorary Chair Liz Smith and organization founders Arnold Scaasi and Parker Ladd at the Gala Kick-Off Cocktail reception.

Literacy Partners 25th Annual "Evening of Readings" Gala will take place on May 11, 2009 at Lincoln Center and will honor Nina Rennert Davidson, Mitchell Davidson and author Barbara Goldsmith. Joining us on stage in a time honored tradition are celebrated authors Barbara Walters, Christopher Buckley, Marie Brenner and David Wroblewski to share the power of literacy and the written word. For more information or tickets please call 212-573-6933.



Luke Parker Bowles, Literacy Partners Executive Director Susan McLean, Rod Sharp, Sally Sharp and Board Member Jeff Sharp

### SAVE THE DATE!!

Literacy Partners continues to spread the word about adult illiteracy issues by reaching out to a younger demographic. We recently launched a new group called Literacy Associates that is spreading the word to friends, co-workers and family members about the work of Literacy Partners and our fundraising needs.

**Literacy Associates** is holding their first event on **June 2, 2009** from 7:00pm – 10:00pm at Tenjune, located in the meatpacking district. Tickets are \$150. If you are interested in more information or want to receive an invitation please call 646-237-0122.



Emma Davis

## Gala Reader Profile:

Until six years ago, Emma Davis was leading a double life. She, like 3.7 million other New Yorkers, couldn't read – and no one, not even her closest friends and family knew her secret.

"I used to pretend to read *The New York Times* so that I would look smart, like the people I saw in nice suits reading on the way to work," admits Davis. "For years I thought I was the only one bluffing my way through life."

But in 2003, Davis decided to make a change. After hearing a PSA on 1010 WINS, Davis contacted Literacy Partners. Despite being told that classes were full, Davis called back every day until they were able to accommodate her as a full-time student – and she hasn't looked back.

Having earned both her GED and Bachelor of Arts degree, Davis is about to begin studying for a Master's degree in Mental Health Counseling at the College of New Rochelle. And that's not all. Since 2003, Davis has been working as a Literacy Partners Reading Center Assistant, helping others to succeed, just as she has.



Carlos Caban

## Student Profile:

Carlos Caban is a 43 year old with a long history of overcoming challenges. Carlos grew up in Manhattan, near where he still lives today. Carlos often missed school due to an on-going illness and was always playing catch up. He was regularly promoted to the next grade but recognized that he was not on the same level as the other students.

Carlos has struggled with his reading and writing skills ever since and almost two years ago decided to confront his fears and the embarrassment he felt and came to Literacy Partners for help. He entered our Adult Basic Education program reading under the 5th grade level. Carlos was nervous at first, but soon realized that so many others in his class were just like him; he felt comfortable and fit in. This gave him the confidence to try hard every day to make strides in his reading and writing. Carlos has not always been on an easy path, but he wants people to know that no matter what you must try to get over or around the obstacles you are confronted with. He encourages people who are ashamed and afraid to get help with their education to do so because he knows what an enormous difference it can make in one's life.

## Literacy Partners Alphabet Project

*Thank you to all of the sponsors and supporters of the Literacy Partners Alphabet Project!*

By "sponsoring a letter", they have helped ensure that those 16 and older have access to the education they need to realize their potential as individuals, parents and citizens.

Their support has been letter perfect.

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### Literacy Partners, Inc.

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