

Volunteers of Kanawha County Work to Improve Adult Literacy

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Susan Leffler remembers the first person she taught to read in her work with the Literacy Volunteers of Kanawha County.

Her student's name was Donna. She was 65 years old and had a learning disability.

"In the first session, I asked her, 'Why do you want to read?' And she told me this was something she tried to learn all of her life, and she wanted to learn so that when she got to heaven, she would be able to tell her mom that she finally did it," Leffler recalled.

Donna struggled through her lessons but managed to get through two textbooks before she died.

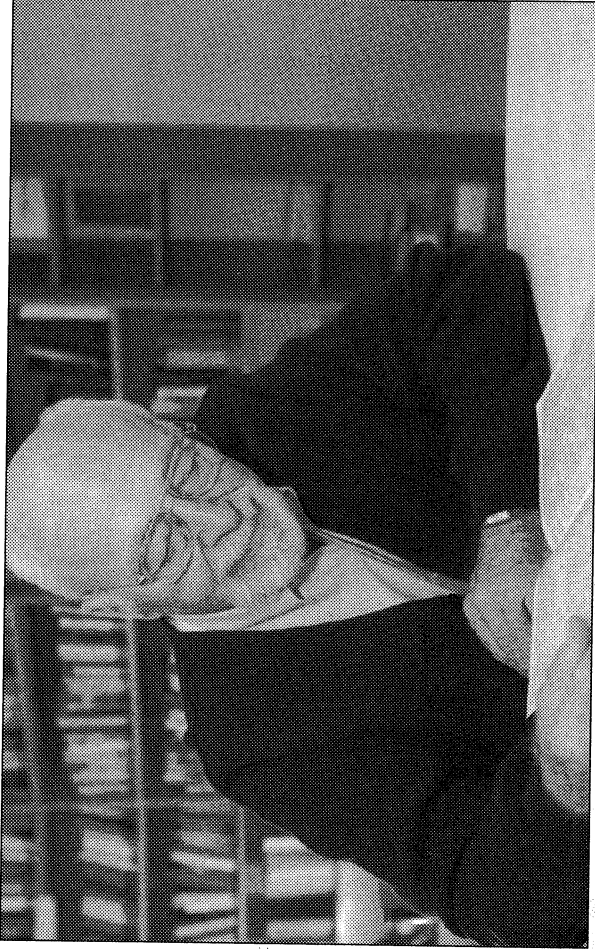
"I miss her to this day," Leffler said. "That was five years ago, and I still miss her."

In her seven years with the Literacy Volunteers, Leffler has encountered many stories of inspiration.

"One I remember, the parent took the child out of public schools — never put her back in. They did a little bit of home schooling, so the child knew how to read but not very well. The child came to us as a young adult and she was very bright. One of the tutors taught her for a couple of years. She went on to get a good job and support her family," Leffler recalled.

The Literacy Volunteers was created in 1981 and provides reading, writing and English as a second language tutoring services. Leffler said the organization trains many volunteers, and it always is seeking new tutors.

The organization mainly focuses on adults, but it also tutors children older than 6 years old. Executive Director



Marleen Seese says readers of all levels come through the doors.

"We figure one in five adults in Kanawha County can't read adequately to get by in life," Seese said. "They can't read directions on a pill bottle, can't vote, can't go into the doctor's office to fill out forms."

The West Virginia Department of Education's website cited a 1998 study by the National Institute for Literacy, which ranked West Virginia 33rd on the lowest percentage of adults at Level 1 literacy.

The site says there have been several improvements since that study.

According to a 2003 study by the National Center for Education Statistics, 13 percent of West Virginians aged 16 and older lacked basic prose

literacy skills.

"We're finding that maybe they started earlier in their careers as construction workers and now to get a raise or a better job classification, they need to learn how to read blueprints," Leffler said. "They will come to us asking to learn how to read a blueprint or saying they need to learn how to write a basic plan. ... You have to be able to read and write these days to get any kind of decent job. It isn't like it used to be."

Tutors may use several different techniques to teach reading.

In the first session, students are given an evaluation to see where they stand. In the second session, students will share a life experience, writing and then reading their story.

Textbooks also are a crucial part.

Although textbooks are written on a lower reading level, the stories are about adult matters, such as learning how to use a computer or learning how to obtain a GED.

The books gradually progress by adding harder vocabulary words, and they also quiz the student's reading comprehension.

"They're learning not only the grammar and the vocabulary, but they start to learn a little history and a little geography the more they continue," Leffler said.

Tutors also take an interest in their students so they will stick with the program.

Leffler said this is how she helped Donna learn to read.

When her student first came into the office, Leffler said one of her glasses lenses was missing.

"I had to take a Magic Marker and write letters this big," Leffler gestured, "on a piece of paper because she couldn't see. ... This went on for several weeks."

Leffler said she kept encouraging her to get new glasses, but one day something changed. Leffler said she learned of her love of dogs.

"That's what she was really interested in, and I said, 'OK, let's write about those dogs.' That's what we did. She read a little about dogs, and one day she came in and she had the glasses. I opened up the book, and she started to read. I almost started to cry. It was like, 'Oh my gosh! She can read!'

"She never missed a lesson, and if she did, she would call me," Leffler said. "The biggest problem we have is attendance. When people don't come, that's hard on tutors. The tutors take it very seriously."