

Adult Literacy: Personal Success Stories

“Getting My Diploma Was Once an Unthinkable victory”

via ProLiteracy.org

In elementary school Mayra Sanchez was put in special ed because of a language barrier - she was born in Puerto Rico. The label followed her all the way through high school. She graduated with an IEP Diploma. But the employers she was trying to work with in the healthcare field told her that it was not acceptable. Her goal was to become a phlebotomist. She had been told in high school that she would never achieve a diploma because of her learning disability.

But Mayra was determined.

She joined the Syracuse City School District's Adult Education program and took classes for three years while working full time. When she finally passed the TASC Test and earned her High School Equivalency Diploma, she was very emotional. She broke down while telling her story at graduation and Kathy Lent, coordinator of adult education for the district, finished reading her speech for her.



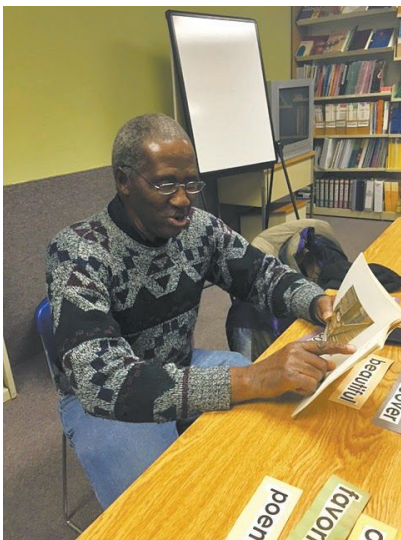
Today she is working full time as a phlebotomist and is taking her pre-reqs at the college level to join an X-Ray Tech program.

“I Couldn’t Spell Green”

via ProLiteracy.org

This is a story that might make you angry. It might make you sad. In the end, it will fill you with warmth. This particular story starts the same as thousands of others. However, in the end this is “Henry’s story.”

In 1950s rural Kentucky, a young boy was trying to balance his chores on the farm with his school work. Henry’s family, most of them not formally educated, was not enjoying the benefits of the post-war economic boom happening across much of America. And at just 8 years old, Henry’s family needed his help on the farm, so Henry left school.



Throughout his life, Henry worked hard. Today he’ll tell you he is proud of his work. He farmed, painted houses, drove trucks, and did custodial work. “It was hard growing up and not knowing how to read,” Henry said. He relied on his mom, who read a little. As an adult, Henry stayed in his childhood home with his younger brothers and sister.

In his 40s, Henry married and moved to southern Indiana. His wife read well and had a good job. It was with her help that Henry was able to read road signs while driving trucks. She also taught Henry to vote. In 2010, Henry came to The Literacy Center wanting to learn to read well enough to read the Bible. His initial assessment showed that he didn’t recognize many sight words, such as to, has, and she. Additionally, Henry was unable to write the alphabet.

Courtney, Henry’s education coordinator, discovered that Henry was a musician. He plays multiple instruments, yet had never learned the ABC song. This is when things began to turn around for Henry. Courtney printed the sheet music for Henry and told him to learn the song, and that it would help him to be able to place the letters in the correct order. Henry came back one week later, able to write all 26 letters in the alphabet.

“Henry needs less help with words. He will sound them out by himself now. Eight months ago he was unable to blend the sounds together, and he had very little understanding of blends and digraphs. I am so proud of his accomplishments,” Courtney said.

“In the last year, I couldn’t spell green,” Henry said. “If I saw a word like perfect I’d just pass it up. In the last eight months, I haven’t had to ask for as much help. Reading changes lives. It makes you more responsible for your life. Not reading can hurt you.”

“It’s Not How You Start; It’s How You Finish”

via ProLiteracy.org

Marty Calanche has struggled with reading since he was a child. At first he did well in school, moving right along from first grade to fourth. Then things changed. He started to notice that his reading was bad, but he still kept moving up grades. In the eighth grade he realized that he did not want to go on to the next grade. He was not ready for it and his lack of reading and spelling skills made him feel ashamed.

“I told my teacher and my principal that I wasn’t ready to go to high school because I couldn’t spell or read,” Marty said. “Their reply was that I had to go because they needed the room for the new kids who were coming in.” Marty did continue with school, but left after the 11th grade, before he had the chance to graduate.

He had always been able to learn skills on the job, and in the 1980s he worked with the flight safety parts for the Apache helicopter. Marty was laid off in 1992. He moved to Tucson, Arizona, in hopes of finding a job, but employers told him that he would need his GED to apply for a position.

Marty became discouraged and turned to alcohol. He struggled for years. One day he woke up and no longer wanted or needed a drink. It was time to change his life. In 2010, Marty went to Literacy Connects in Tucson, Arizona. The group empowers people of all ages to develop a sustainable culture of literacy and creative expression.



“I was still embarrassed. When you can’t read you think that you’re the only one like this,” Marty said. “But the staff and tutors at Literacy Connects are so kindhearted and very encouraging. I’m excited that I will soon be able to write a letter to my mom, for the first time ever. Someday I will get the GED that I’ve been wanting since I was a kid.”

Since learning to read, Marty has been an ambassador for ProLiteracy’s continued efforts to increase access to and awareness of quality literacy services. He has participated as a student, tutor trainer, member of the advocacy committee, and board member. In 2015, Marty was invited to be on the floor of the Arizona House of Representatives as the honored guest of his local representative.

“There is so much to think about now,” Marty said. “I’m seeing the future and it looks good! I am surrounded by people who care and who are helping me to improve my life and I love them all. I have always heard that it’s not how you start; it’s how you finish!”

Below is a letter written by Marty about his first experiences in his literacy quest.

My Experience Here at Literacy Volunteers of Tucson

"My participation here at L.V.T. is a discovering process. I have observed myself in embracing my relationship with my tutors. They seem to have their own way in helping me to develop my understanding.

I love their determination as well as their patience. I have also discovered that it is very helpful to participate in events. I like the wonderful people who are very generous in helping us students and staff members here at Literacy Volunteers of Tucson.

Back when I first started it was my third night here. I was leaving out the door and I had a good thought. It was "I'm so glad I came in to sign up" and as I drove down Speedway I yelled out this: "Can this be my calling to help other people who can't read?" I was just thinking out loud. I was just that happy that it finally came out into view that I let so many people know at one time that I was illiterate.

Then, seven weeks later here I was in the Fry's food store to buy some Powerball tickets and I asked the cashier for five of them, and as she went back to get them I noticed her name tag. I said to her, "I will be right back; I needed to grab something, so keep my tickets warm for good luck." When I returned and paid for the tickets I said "Thanks Susan, It's Susan right?" She said "yes" and I looked at her and said "it's just that I'm learning to read and it's great!" and she smiled.

Although I knew it was Susan, I just needed to tell someone else that I was learning to read. And by the way, I've also experienced a number of mixed emotions being here at L.V.T., like for example, embarrassment and confused, intense feelings, but I like the one we call Love. There is so much love in here for all of us! I am taking part in a new venture.

I would also like to say my younger sister is the only one out of my family at this time that knows that I am getting help so I can get my GED.

And as for the community, I'm sure they don't know if I can read or not, but you know, and I have always known. Okay, I take it back. The community is starting to know since I've come in to L.V.T.

My Determination Is Important to Me!!!"

*By
Marty Colombe*

Excerpts from “Adults Who Can't Read”

By Anndee Hochman

May 13, 1985

Via WashingtonPost.com

Important:

Keep in mind that this article was written in 1985, so the statistics provided are no longer current.

Until Gilbert Hughes, 32, was divorced last fall, his wife paid all the bills and answered all the mail. At the Northern Virginia aluminum siding company Hughes owns, a foreman handled the invoices. When his two young children asked him to read, he would look at the pictures and make up a story. For years the successful businessman relied on his memory and a small tape recorder to preserve names, phone numbers and directions.

"I would say things to myself over and over and over," Hughes said recently. "If I go to a place the first time, I can get back there. It's like a handicapped person, in a way -- when you lose your sight, you get something else."

Six months ago, Hughes pulled out his tape recorder and called the Literacy Council of Northern Virginia, located in Arlington, for directions to its office.

"You can fool a lot of people out there," he said. "But I just decided it was about time I learned how to read."

Hughes is one of an estimated 4 million adults in the United States now learning to read with the help of literacy councils, Adult Basic Education classes, church volunteers and business groups.

But for every Gilbert Hughes, education experts say, there are several others who are not being taught, who are not getting any closer to being able to decipher a street sign, read a medicine label or fill out a job application.

The 27 million adults nationwide estimated to be functionally illiterate are the focus of a national awareness campaign by literacy and education organizations and the Advertising Council.

At the same time, some local officials, education groups and literacy volunteers, watching the struggles of illiterate adults firsthand, have begun to channel more attention -- and money -- toward teaching adults to read.

Illiteracy "tends to be a hidden need," said Bill Bliss, a language specialist at the Center for Applied Linguistics in the District. "There is a phenomenon of adults who manage to hide the fact that they cannot read. They are . . . quietly and not visibly struggling to cope, just fumbling along."

Some illiterate adults, such as Mary Ratan, cope by backing away from life.

Until Ratan, a 38-year-old mother of six children ranging in age from 20 to 7, divorced her husband and moved to Springfield in 1979, she didn't do anything that might risk getting lost or confused by words she couldn't read.

"I wouldn't take a bus; if I had to go somewhere, I would always take a cab," she said recently.

Ratan, the oldest girl in a family of 14 children, said she attended school sporadically while growing up in The Plains, Va. But it wasn't until two years ago, while struggling as a single parent, that she began to feel the gap in her education.

Ratan and her 10-year-old daughter Odessa "weren't getting along like we should because she could read and I couldn't," Ratan said. Then another daughter, who is mentally handicapped, brought some papers home from school and asked for her mother's signature.

"I thought it was for a field trip," Ratan said. She was horrified later to learn she had signed documents to put her daughter in a home for disabled children.

At that moment, Ratan said, she knew she had to learn to read.

Nearly two years later, Ratan sits beside her tutor, Whit Watkins, at the table in her neat kitchen and reads slowly but clearly through the literacy council's Level 3 workbook.

Ratan remembers the first word she learned, after she and Watkins had practiced consonants and short vowel sounds for what seemed an eternity. She read "bird." Then "dish." Then "cup."

Now "when the kids bring something home, I know what it is. I can write letters," Ratan said with a smile. She sent Watkins a Christmas card last year. And she said there are fewer problems getting along with Odessa: "She doesn't look down on me anymore."

Literacy experts say there is no typical adult illiterate. But often, they note, events such as divorce, the birth of children, a job promotion or retirement prompt adults who have managed for years without reading to call for help.

Until then, they say, adults who can't read often cope by establishing unvarying routines for daily life and facing new situations with frequently ingenious ploys.

Adults who are illiterate "develop very good visual and aural memories," said Elsa Angel, president of the Literacy Council of Northern Virginia. "Or they make excuses," for instance, telling a supermarket cashier they forgot their glasses or asking another customer to point out a special brand of food.

Some, such as Hughes, excel in their jobs, successfully hiding their reading problems from most friends and colleagues. When he telephoned clients, Hughes explained recently, "I would say, 'How do you spell that?' and spit it into the tape recorder real fast."

Hughes can't recall anyone ever trying to teach him to read, but he vividly remembers growing more frustrated and disillusioned with each grade he attended in Richmond public schools.

"When you can't read, you become a troublemaker. Kids embarrass you," he said last week, relaxing in the living room of his tutor's Annandale home. "I got disgusted with it. Everyone else could do it and, heck, I couldn't. I'd sit down and try, and throw the book across the room."

By the seventh grade, Hughes said, he couldn't stand to be in school. He went to class 75 days that year and skipped 53. When his father asked him to join the family business, Hughes, then 14, quit school and went to work.

"We're not stupid people," Hughes said. "I just didn't find the time in my life to do something I was supposed to do."

For Victor, an employee for a Northern Virginia furniture company, the fear of failing or being embarrassed by illiteracy was nearly paralyzing.

Victor, who asked that his last name not be used, moved from New York with his wife 2 1/2 years ago and delayed looking for a job for four months because he panicked at the prospect of filling out applications.

He had dropped out of Manhattan's Vocational and Technical High School in the 10th grade and said he feared being humiliated if an employer asked him to write down his experience or educational background.

"I couldn't spell 'Manhattan,' let alone 'vocational,' " Victor said. "I thought, here I am, 34 years old, and I can't even fill out a simple application."

In restaurants, Victor said, he would order the same thing every time. He memorized one bus route and never took a different one. Early this year, an unemployment counselor advised him to seek tutoring.

Literacy experts and the adults they teach say the process is painstaking, but rich with the excitement of cracking a code -- sounding out a street sign for the first time or looking up an unfamiliar word in the dictionary.

After four months of twice-weekly sessions, Victor said, "I could bring myself to pick up a book and try to read it. Before, why bother trying if I would know only two words and the third would stop me?"

Mary Ratan can write letters now and order from catalogues, but she wants to learn enough to read the Bible to her children: "That's what I want to do more than anything else," she said.

Gilbert Hughes can slowly decipher letters that come to the house and read the dialogue in comic strips, although the letters U and W sometimes confuse him.

"It's no fun -- not at first," he said. "I guess it will be later, when you can read different books."

Hughes hopes eventually to read the newspaper, books on history, or one of the heavy hard-backed volumes his friends sometimes carry.

"It must be nice to do that," he said.

An Excerpt from “The Closed World of Adults Who Can’t Read”

By Amy Cunningham via DMagazine.com

Published in D Magazine June 1979

Pretty, blonde Vicki Adler stammered, “I don’t want to read.” A cluster of kids in the back of the room giggled. “Vicki,” the teacher urged, “please read the second paragraph.” Vicki’s heart was pounding hard. “I don’t want to read today,” she said, rebelliously this time. The teacher wrote something in a roster, looked around the room, then sighed. “Tom, would you read her part?” Vicki was relieved to hear her classmate pronounce the impossible words. She could read only three of the small ones – “and,” “a,” “the.” She wiped her hands on her skirt and tried to relax. She had made it through another class without revealing the secret. Vicki was a 16-year-old ninth grader who had never learned to read.

It was much harder to keep that secret now that she was in high school. How much longer could she keep the truth from her mother? What would happen if the teacher knew? There was no real problem hiding the situation from the other kids because they all acted like they hated her anyway. She had one friend, Barb, a classmate who “helped out” by letting Vicki copy all her homework for three years. But in the middle of eighth grade even Barb threatened to bail out. “She told me she just couldn’t let me copy anymore,” Vicki recalls, “and I was beside myself. I almost went crazy. ‘Barb,’ I said, ‘You’ve got to help me. I can’t make it without copying from you.’ So I kept crying and begging until Barb said she’d let me copy one more year. Of course, I was smart enough to make some mistakes and not copy word for word.”

Elementary school in West Dallas had been better. The teacher there had given Vicki a desk near the front of the room and instructed her to sit quietly and color with crayons while the other children learned. At least no one had laughed at her. When Vicki and her divorced mother moved to Euless in 1965, Vicki was asked to retake third grade. That didn’t bother her too much. What bugged her was that her younger brother began to make better marks. “I kept all his report cards and I always wanted to erase his name from them and tell everybody. ‘This is mine.’” Vicki’s scores were always bad, but teachers promoted her because her attitude was good. She tried. “I wanted to learn so *bad*. I can’t tell you how bad I wanted to learn. But when the teachers told me to read something, I’d just sit there and stare at the page. That’s all I could do.” Two weeks before the end of ninth grade, Vicki decided to quit, get married, move back to Dallas, and forget about reading. Maybe she *was* a dummy, she thought, the way everybody said.

Vicki’s husband knew she read poorly, but he didn’t realize she couldn’t read *at all*. “Why, you can’t even go to K-Mart and pick a dress to put on lay-away without filling out forms,” Vicki says. Going to the grocery store was something she refused to do alone. She believed the clerks would cheat her if she couldn’t count back her own change. Since she couldn’t read labels, she memorized the appearance of household goods: Tide detergent came in an orange box, diet drinks had a big “D” printed on each bottle, vanilla ice cream came in a blue carton, cinnamon-flavored chewing gum came in a red wrapper most of the time. Sometimes she wound up chewing “cherry.”

Vicki learned to drive by following buildings and other landmarks instead of the street signs. She received her Texas driver's license by passing an oral exam. One Christmas, she took a friend to the record shop in order to buy her husband a particular 45. She couldn't remember the name of the group or the title of the song. Her friend proceeded to read aloud every hit on the Top 40. When they reached 36, Vicki said "Stop! That's it."

But soon the pressures of a restricted existence got the best of her. During a routine medical check-up, Vicki's self-effacing attitude prompted the doctor to suggest, "Maybe you have emotional problems." She ran out of the office and cried all the way home. She cried a lot in those days. "Maybe you *do* have emotional problems," her husband replied when she described the episode. A few weeks later, Vicki visited a psychiatrist. "I have one big problem," she confessed. "I can't read." "Would you like to do something about it?" the psychiatrist asked. Vicki took a tissue out of her purse and blew her nose. "Yes," she sniffled, "yes, I really would."

Vicki learned her alphabet at the age of twenty-three from a DISD Basic Education instructor. Then she enrolled in a reading course that didn't work out because it was designed for Mexican-Americans learning English as a second language. She was almost ready to give up again when her mother-in-law saw the early morning Channel 8 broadcast conducted daily by Operation LIFT. Last September, Vicki started going to LIFT's two-hour classes twice a week. Today, she knows all the sounds the twenty-six letters make. She can figure out words like "kidnap" and "pistol" within a reasonable time. Soon she hopes to be reading small books to her children. "Right now, I just make up stories to go with the pictures in the book. But I'm learning to read now that I know I *can* learn. And you wouldn't believe how my attitude towards just about everything has changed. I feel so good, so different, so free."