

Citizen Involvement Matters

Newport's Project Adult Literacy proves it does.

By Janice Billings,
CdMRA Board Member (CdMSW) and Project Adult Literacy Volunteer Tutor

If Corona del Mar is “the Crown of the Sea,” then Project Adult Literacy, an offering of our Newport Beach Central Library, is one of the gems in that crown. “Since its inception in 1986, Project Adult Literacy has offered free, one-on-one tutoring and small group classes in basic literacy, to adults who live or work in the Newport Beach area. The program is open to adults, over 18 years of age, who are either native English speakers with low literacy skills or those who learned English as a second language.” (Newport Beach Public Library website)

In the early 1980's, with the American Library Association taking the lead, librarians across the country convened to discuss how public libraries could address illiteracy. In 1983, President Reagan announced the nationwide literacy initiative. In 1984, California created the first statewide public library adult literacy program in the United States designed to support English-speaking adults with low literacy skills who had not succeeded in the classroom environment. It led the nation in developing “new readers – new leaders.” Today, 1105 California public library jurisdictions participate with approximately 16,000 learners each year.



According to Cherall Weiss, Program Coordinator of our local program, 23,000 adults in Newport/Mesa need literacy services including higher level reading and problem-solving skills. Data from 2006 to 2017 show that the Newport Beach Library helped well over 1000 learners and trained nearly 400 volunteer tutors. Tutors must complete a comprehensive training program which emphasizes the program's mission- “The Mission of Project Adult Literacy is to develop the literacy skills of adults to empower them to achieve greater success in their lives – at home, at work and in the community.”

Then the process is clearly outlined: Learners indicate their specific goal(s), complete an extensive assessment to determine their literacy level – fluency, vocabulary, reading, writing – and have an interview to further define their needs.



This is not an ESL class; learners must have a certain level of English to participate and work successfully toward their goals which could include: getting a better job; achieving a diploma or degree; being able to help their children with homework and communicate with their teachers. Tutors are then matched with a learner and together work toward fulfilling those goals.

As a tutor in the program, I believe that this is one of the most rewarding things I have ever done. My learner and I have been together for almost a year. We meet weekly for about 1 ½ hours at the library. The lessons are mutually planned but are always designed to work toward the learner's goal(s). During the pandemic, we used Zoom and a video program called Flipgrid so we would continue to make progress. When we resumed in-person sessions, we continued to "meet" midweek online. She would prepare essays and then deliver them orally so I could help with vocabulary, pronunciation, sentence structure etc. She, as most learners in the program, is highly motivated and since Flipgrid saves the videos, we can see and hear her progress from the very beginning. The joy we both experience is so rewarding! She intentionally uses new vocabulary to enrich her speaking and writing and that, too, brings on the "high fives!"



Since I have been working with my learner, I have watched her become more confident in her interactions: She has been able to participate in her child's PTA and actively support the academic and extra -curricular programs put on by the parents; she has been asked to take on a leadership role in a volunteer organization she is involved in; and is comfortable participating as a consumer in the community. She is so happy with her improved abilities that she is encouraging many of her friends to join the program as well.



Learners are also encouraged to participate in small group sessions offered in the program: Morning and Evening Book Clubs; Speaking with Others; Current Events; Writing Your Story; Idioms in Daily Life etc.

This library service is professionally run, has an elected Advisory Board, and has tutors submit regular reports. The library personnel are knowledgeable and extremely helpful to both tutors and learners. I have been overwhelmed by the resources made available to us at the library and online. But, beyond all that, this program is a labor of love; of participating in meaningful and life-changing events for both tutors and learners; of watching as hidden potential emerges from each learner; of hearing about goals fulfilled as alumni return to tell their stories.

This is, indeed, a precious gem in the “Crown of the Sea.”

Interested in the program? Call 949.717.3874 or email literacy@newportbeachca.gov

One final note: From our ‘Small World’ files, CdMRA Past President Laura Curran was Director of Literacy Services at Placentia Library District from 1988-1990.