

Literacy council feeds yearning for learning

By Chris Traber
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If you subscribe to American social reformer, writer and statesman Frederick Douglass' dictum, "Once you learn to read, you will be forever free," Literacy Council York-Simcoe has been paroling people from the shackles of illiteracy since 1984.

A full and part-time staff of seven and 84 volunteer tutors help more than 500 clients upgrade their reading, math, computer and life literacy skills each year, executive director Trisha Patrick said.

Anyone 16 or older, who isn't in school and wants to improve skills for higher education, employment and quality of life is considered at the Newmarket organization.

Calvin Howson, 22, and John Martin, 83, are clients. Despite a 61-year age difference, both Newmarket men have a yearning for learning. A Grade 9 dropout, Mr. Howson is being tutored in math and English. He's invested more than a year in studies and plans on several more with the council toward earning a Grade 12 general equivalency diploma. Eventually, he wants to be a heavy machinery mechanic.

"In Grade 9, I couldn't focus," he said. "I couldn't fit in to a class or a group. The one-on-one tutoring here works. It's awesome."

The young man's progress is gratifying, his volunteer tutor Joanne Banfill said.

"Calvin's a capable young man with a good memory and is moving ahead quickly," said the Aurora resident and music teacher who tutors two hours weekly.

A retired pipe welder, Mr. Martin wanted to harness the power of computers and the Internet to expand his interests and horizons. He's been enrolled in council's basic computer operation, Internet, e-mail and MS Office applications training for six weeks.

"I had to learn how to use a mouse first and then the Internet and e-mail," he said proudly. "Now, a whole new world has opened for me. There's so much information. I know so much more today than on the first day here. I'm enjoying it."

Mr. Martin is now e-mailing friends and exploring the wealth of knowledge available online. The senior client has amazed himself and staff with his new skills, Ms Patrick said.

The two men working to upgrade skills most of us take for granted aren't alone. Citing a 2003 adult literacy and skills survey, Ms Patrick said more than 42 per cent of Canadians lack the reading skills needed to function in today's knowledge-based economy.

Problem-solving skills are below acceptable levels in 68.5 per cent of adult Canadians and half of us need training for basic math skills.

Literacy, she said, means different things to different people. For some, it's being able to function at work. For others, literacy is the ability to read instructions on a medicine bottle.

In a fast-paced world where information is often communicated through the written word, it may be difficult to believe many people don't have the skills necessary to read and write well enough to apply for a job, write a grocery list or read their children a bed-time story.

Adult literacy is a serious issue in Ontario. More than 20 per cent of adults in the province don't have basic skills and about one in four would benefit from literacy upgrading.

Literacy is strongly associated with our quality of life and overall well-being, Ms Patrick said. Many people struggling with literacy have issues with health, economics, employment stability, criminal activity, socialization and communication.



Turning point. Calvin Howson is helped by volunteer tutor Joanne Banfill at Literacy Council York-Simcoe. According to the organization, more than 25 per cent of Canadians lack the reading skills needed to function in today's knowledge-based economy. *Staff photo/Steve Somerville*

Low literacy poses a long-term challenge to our health care system and defies easy resolution.

The higher a nation's literacy skills, the more likely its population has healthier habits and lifestyles. Those with higher literacy skills tend to be more involved citizens who participate in their communities.

Literacy is also linked to economic success. Literacy levels determine the kind of jobs people find, the salaries they make and their ability to upgrade their work skills. Literacy also contributes to society's overall economic and social performance.

The National Anti-Poverty Organization found people with literacy problems earn two-thirds the income of other adults, they are twice as likely to be unemployed and receiving social assistance and adults with low literacy skills usually have the lowest-paying, least-secure positions.

Adult students also experience many barriers acquiring literacy skills. About 65 per cent of people entering the prison system for the first time are not functionally literate, according to Correctional Services of Canada.

Former inmates, who participate in rehabilitation programs that include literacy upgrading, are half as likely to be arrested again.

Low literacy is an inter-generational problem. A child's progress in school is clearly related to his or her parents' literacy. Children raised in a literate household are more likely to enter Grade 1 with several thousands hours of, one-on-one pre-reading experiences behind them.

In contrast, children raised in low literate homes enter school without being reading ready. For parents to be effective role models for their children, they require developed literacy skills.

The council offers a range of literacy and essential skills upgrading programs. One-on- one tutorials match students with trained volunteer tutors who help students reach their goals.

In small instruction, students come together in small groups of six to eight to upgrade their skills for independence, higher education and employment. Groups are facilitated by volunteers and staff and held at various times.

The computer-based program enables students to upgrade their literacy skills through an interactive educational program, providing a variety of curriculum-based activities and tests to enhance essential skills.

Employment readiness training involves basic computer training and skills to enhance employability. The council also offers the mobile adolescent and adult learning lab, a 10-laptop mobile learning lab equipped with educational and employment-related software training programs.

The power of literacy was poignantly illustrated by a former student the council identified only as Bernie, Ms Patrick said. He was enrolled for several years in the early 2000s. He had a rocky life and wanted to write his memoirs. He worked hard and with the help of volunteers, he published his story as a Christmas gift to his family. The following month, he died, at 81, from injuries after a fall.

"His story is a testament to his new skills and the fact that it's never too late to change your life," Ms Patrick said.

For information about how to get help or how you can support Literacy Council York-Simcoe, call 905-853-6279, e-mail lityork@lcys.ca or visit lcys.ca

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