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Leslie Ferenc

It happened in a flash.

One second he was helping a friend with some yard work and the next, Peter woke up in a hospital bed unable to walk or speak.

A brain hemorrhage almost 10 years ago took its toll, robbing him of basic skills. Determination, inner strength and support from his family helped him learn to walk and talk again. The Literacy Council York-Simcoe is helping him retrain his brain and is giving him back his life.

"My goal is to improve my reading, writing and math skills to get a new job," Peter said, explaining his memory and ability to reason had been so damaged he had to resign from his job in emergency services. And though doctors didn't hold out much hope for major improvements in his condition, Peter has come a long way.

The Literacy Council, which has been serving York Region for 27 years, providing educational upgrading and employment training programs, has made a huge difference for Peter and thousands of other residents.

In York Region, one in three, or 275,000 people, turn to 41 United Way member agencies every year.

About 500 people yearly seek services at the Literacy Council, where one-on-one tutorials and small group instruction help adult students like Peter upgrade skills. Computer-based literacy upgrading offers curriculum-based activities to enhance skills. The council also provides computer training to prepare students for the workforce.

Additional funding this year from United Way of York Region for the Literacy Council's Mobile Adolescent and Adult Learning Lab has been an important investment in the work being done on the front lines. The mobile learning lab, which has 10 laptops, is equipped with education - and employment-related software training programs. The lab can be set up anywhere in the region to provide people 16 and older with an opportunity to improve their skills.

The services are essential in today's still fragile economy, said executive director Trisha Patrick, who noted that in the last three years alone, upwards of 5,000 people in the region lost jobs.

"In the face of high unemployment, we're also experiencing a significant increase in individuals trying to access literacy services in neighbourhoods across the region."

The learning lab and other council programs are addressing short- and long-term goals, said Patrick, noting that by 2031, 77 per cent of people who are eligible to work will need to have post-secondary education just to compete in the workforce.

"United Way is a phenomenal asset for us," she said, adding funding has allowed the agency to expand programs and hire staff to meet growing demands.

"We're improving lives through literacy."

To make a donation go to <http://www.unitedwayyorkregion.com/> or call 905-474-9974.