

The ABCs of Literacy

Learning how to read – finally

By Terri Akman

At 55 years old, learning how to read is hard – really, really hard. Just ask Daniel Delgado. After faking it for five decades, Delgado realized the time had come to finally tackle the one skill that had eluded him for way too long.

“By fourth or fifth grade I had problems reading,” recalls Delgado, who lives in Mantua. “At that time, they thought I was a problem person. I didn’t want to participate in class because I didn’t understand what was going on. By seventh grade I still didn’t know how to read. It was embarrassing.”

At 16, frustrated and lost in the educational system, he dropped out of school. At 17, he got married and learned to rely on his wife to read for him. Delgado got a job as a dishwasher at a restaurant, working his way up through various restaurant jobs. He always figured out ways to get other workers to read for him, and he became adept at keeping his secret.

“People who don’t know how to read adjust,” explains Delgado.

Case in point: the time Delgado got his driver’s license. He remembers answering twenty questions using the “eenie-meenie-miny-mo” method. When he handed his test in, the proctor told him he left one blank and if he got it right he’d pass, if not, he’d fail.

“I went back and did eenie-meenie-miny-mo again, and that’s how I passed my driver’s license test,” admits Delgado. “I really take care of my license because I don’t think I could do this again.”

Delgado couldn’t do many things that most people take for granted, like reading his children a bedtime story, surfing the internet or filling out medical forms at the doctor’s office.

Throughout his life, only Delgado’s closest friends and family knew his secret. Sadly, when his wife passed away in 2008, he no longer had someone to rely on for reading. He realized then it was time to learn how to read. Delgado went to Literacy Volunteers of Camden County because they offered a tutor who would provide one-on-one instruction. The service is private, confidential and free.

The Illiteracy Epidemic

Delgado is not alone. Approximately one out of seven U.S. residents over age 16 lacks basic literacy skills, according to Denise Weinberg, Director of Literacy Volunteers of Camden County. And New Jersey exceeds the national average. U.S. Department of Education statistics from 2003 find 17 percent of New Jersey’s population reads below an eighth grade level, compared to 14.7 percent nationally.

“We help adults at the lowest levels of literacy,” explains Weinberg. “That includes our English as a Second Language group, who are people looking to speak and understand English better, and a Basic Literacy group which consists of people who speak English, but need help with elementary reading and sometimes math skills.”

The state of the economy has forced more people to confront their literacy problem as they lose their jobs and search for new ones. When applying for unemployment, workers are given a test, and they have to reach a certain score in order to qualify for career training.

Although budget cuts have affected many government programs, Literacy Volunteers of Camden County has fared well, so far. “Our main money comes from the federal government, channeled through the state,” says Weinberg. “It’s a priority to help people get back on their feet right now.”



Fortunately, the pool of volunteers has grown along with the need. Literacy tutors must take a six-week course that includes 15 hours of training. The classes teach a specialized approach to adult education, including various techniques to best serve the students. Tutors learn how to create lesson plans and how to teach adults with compassion and dignity. Volunteers generally meet with students one day each week for two hours.

The Joy in Teaching

After watching the movie *The Reader* about an adult who couldn't read, Sharon Knobler of Cherry Hill was inspired to learn more about adult illiteracy. "I was shocked at the statistics," she recalls. Recently retired from a 40-year teaching career, Knobler knew she could use her skills to help adults learn to read, so she signed up to be a literacy volunteer.

The Literacy Volunteers program is student centered, so tutors create lesson plans to meet their student's individual goals. "We try to give students exactly what they need rather than sitting in a classroom and hearing things other students need," explains Weinberg. "Our tutors really care and listen to what the students have to say. It's personal. That encouragement helps a lot of people build their confidence and move forward."

Knobler finds inspiration from her students. She has worked for more than a year with a woman who needs to achieve an eighth-grade reading level to enroll in a program to become a certified nursing assistant. "She's very close to achieving her goal," points out Knobler. "It's difficult because she works full time, has little children and comes to tutoring twice a week."

"This is the best thing I ever did," says Knobler. "Being a teacher my entire life, of course I love teaching. As a high school teacher I worked with the teenage population. I love kids very much but as with high school students, they're not always anxious to do everything you want them to do. The adult population is so eager to learn and so appreciative of everything you do. And, you see them grow week by week."

Learning to read as an adult comes with many challenges. For students like Delgado, there is often a learning disability that wasn't recognized when they were young. Delgado admits he gets frustrated easily. "At my age, my mind is occupied with so many things that it makes learning to read even harder," he says.

Today's technology has made life even more difficult for illiterate adults as more people rely on texting or e-mailing instead of actually speaking on the phone. The English language is difficult enough with many exceptions to its rules, and to make matters worse, texting shortcuts ignore even those rules.

Delgado has been meeting with his tutor for several months and is seeing progress. He now works as a caterer, and he recently wrote out his shopping list for the very first time. In the past, he'd have to remember what he needed to buy.

His family has been extremely supportive, and he looks forward to being able to read books to his grandchildren. His biggest regret is not learning how to read sooner. "I think if I would have known how to read, life would have been much easier for me," says Delgado. "I would have been somebody."

