

# Creating a Community of Readers to Fight Functional Illiteracy

By Steve Sumerford

A PROGRAM WITH HEART IN NORTH CAROLINA EXEMPLIFIES THE FINE WORK MADE POSSIBLE BY THE LILA WALLACE-READER'S DIGEST FUND

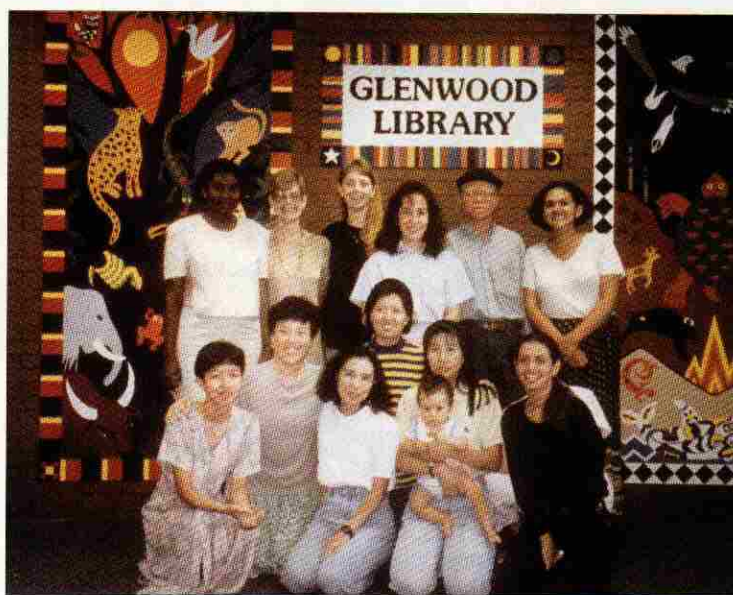
**E**very morning when I was a child, my grandparents would get up an hour early so they would have time to read the morning paper and some selections from the Bible before they headed off to work at the textile mill. At the time, it never occurred to me that my grandparents had limited literacy skills. It was only when I was a teenager that I realized that it took them many hours every week to read their five-page Sunday-school lesson.

My grandmother told me, in the last year of her life, that due to her poor reading skills she had read only one book from cover to cover in the last 30 years. She also told me that she had never been in a public library.

If my grandparents were entering the workforce today with this same level of skills, they would certainly be relegated to low-paying jobs. Even the kinds of assembly-line jobs they had in the textile mills are almost gone now, replaced by jobs that require more advanced reading, critical thinking, and computer skills. My grandparents would be among the ranks of the 40 million Americans today who lack functional literacy skills. Perhaps they would also be searching for a literacy program, and I hope they would call their local public library for help. I also hope their library would have a program for them and all of the others in their town who wanted to learn to read and write.

Last year, when the folks at the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund decided to grant \$4 million to support model literacy programs in public libraries, they were expressing their faith in libraries and providing librarians with an opportunity to reclaim literacy as an issue that is at the very heart and soul of our institutions.

A national spotlight is shining on the illiteracy problem. President Clinton, the nation's governors, leading educators, and business leaders are all talking about the need for more effective literacy programs. Recent economic and de-



*Librarian-tutor Lena Gonzalez (back row, third from left) with students from one of several ESL classes offered at the Glenwood library.*

mographic trends have also reawakened our nation's awareness that functional illiteracy is a growing problem. The advent of welfare reform, the growing number of immigrants who do not speak English, and the demand for a different type of workforce are also highlighting the need for more effective adult literacy programs.

Libraries are at a critical juncture. We have the opportunity to become a key component of the new literacy initiatives. While the decision about whether to provide only minimal services such as an adult learning collection or to offer full-scale literacy instruction programs should be based on the specific needs of each local community, we would be remiss if we ignored the national calls from the president on down for expanded literacy efforts.

It may be difficult to contemplate adding a new literacy effort to our already very-full plates, especially since technology is absorbing more and more of our resources. However, literacy work in the Information Age looks very different from the phonics-based curriculum of a decade ago. If we view literacy work from this new framework, we may see that literacy programs are a natural part of our basic work, rather than a diversion from what seems to be our technology-driven services.

Rather than seeing technology and literacy as competing budgetary and personnel demands, we have a unique op-

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portunity to not only make our technological resources and expertise available to literacy providers and students but to demonstrate to the nation the powerful role we can play in addressing one of the nation's most critical problems.

To move away from a commitment to adult literacy at this time could be a very serious strategic mistake for libraries. The nation is looking to us to help solve this crisis. Almost every speech or article written about illiteracy mentions libraries as one of the key institutions in the literacy campaign.

### *Literacy as the library's mission*

In 1989, as assistant director of Greensboro Public Library here in North Carolina, Sandy Neerman led an effort to make promotion of literacy a core component of the library's mission. Rather than seeing literacy as an optional service or a project you do only when grant funding is available, Neerman wanted a commitment to literacy to be as closely identified with the library as are reference services, recreational reading, and children's programs.

"When literacy is understood as a part of your core mission, you approach it very differently. You don't just create a department or a special project. When literacy is part of your mission, it is woven into every thing you do," Neerman said.

Now as director of Greensboro, Neerman believes that "with every major decision librarians make, we have to ask ourselves how it impacts our community's illiteracy problem." When the Greensboro Library staff is designing a new building or renovating an old one, we try to create tutoring rooms and learning centers. When we allocate the book budget, we take money for literacy books and software right off of the top. When we hire staff, no matter where they will be working, we try to be sure that they are sensitive to and supportive of literacy efforts.

Rather than automatically launching a new tutoring program, Neerman and the other staff sought input from grassroots community leaders. These leaders consistently pointed out the gaps in the city's existing literacy programs. What became clear to the library staff is that not only was

## LEADING THE WAY TO ADULT LITERACY

By Donna D. Grant

AS MANY AS 50 MILLION PEOPLE in the United States are functionally illiterate, meaning they read at or below the 6th-grade level. Often people listen to these figures with a feeling of helplessness, but 13 public libraries in four states are leading the way out of despair with library-based literacy instruction through the "Literacy in Libraries Across America" project.

The \$4-million, three-year national initiative is designed to strengthen and support existing library-based literacy programs. The libraries selected for their outstanding achievements in literacy received a total of \$2.7 million from the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund to enhance curriculum and instruction available to students enrolled in their programs. The sites are expanding their use of technology as they develop better methods to measure and document learning gains. The fund also awarded \$1.3 million to ALA to provide supportive services.

These programs all share some similarities with Greensboro Public Library's "Community of Readers" (part of the project and described in the accompanying article), yet they are vastly different in their methodology and pedagogical approaches to literacy instruction.

**Alameda County Public Library:** Headquartered at the main library in Fremont, California, the ACPL Adult Literacy Program serves eight communities—Irvington, San Lorenzo, Pleasanton, Dublin, Castro Valley, Albany, Union City, and Newark—through their branch libraries. While small-group instruction is the principal format offered, students also receive assistance through one-on-one tutoring. The curriculum is "learner centered," which means learners define their own goals in relation to their cultural, social, and political needs. Used in a variety of ways throughout the program, computers allow students

to gain skill in editing, keyboard practice, research, resume writing, and job searches. In addition to traditional small-group instruction, Alameda offers "thematic" group instruction in leadership, applied literacy, oral history, women's health issues, and alternative GED instruction. Program specialties include "corrections" (located in a correctional facility) and family literacy. Contact: Sherry Drobner, 510-745-1488.

**Brooklyn Public Library:** The Brooklyn Adult Literacy Program operates out of five learning centers: Bedford, Central, Coney Island, Eastern Parkway, and Williamsburgh libraries. Each center has a literacy collection of books and other materials. Known for its innovative use of technology, the program uses "technology-assisted learning" to develop information literacy and workplace skills. The program centers around writing development, which uses the learners own language and life experiences as the basis for instruction. Through small-group instruction, learners work collaboratively on learner-centered projects that allow them to develop basic skills as well as critical thinking skills. In addition, the BPL newsletter, *Tech Talk*, highlights the innovative technology practices used in the program. The library also offers a family literacy component, which provides interactive strategies for reading to children and helps adults learn how to select children's books. Contact: Susan O'Connor, 718-780-7819.

**New York Public Library:** NYPL's Centers for Reading and Writing offer full service in eight branch libraries, while two additional branches maintain satellite programs. Their approach to reading and writing is grounded in an interactive foundation based on several content areas including history, health and nutrition, math, environmental science, civics, and the voting process. With extensive new-reader collections in its centers, NYPL specializes in working with low-level learners with skills

For more information about Literacy in Libraries Across America, contact **DONNA D. GRANT**, project director, at ALA, 800-545-2433, ext. 3211, or e-mail [dgrant@ala.org](mailto:dgrant@ala.org).

there a need for new literacy services and programs, but there was an even greater need for strategic planning and the creation of an infrastructure to develop appropriate literacy services and to advocate for literacy students.

With this knowledge, the staff and the Friends of the Library recruited representatives from 10 key organizations including the community college, an after-school tutoring program, a community-based adult literacy organization, and the public schools. With the understanding that a holistic, community-based approach would be most effective, they also recruited organizations that are not traditionally members of a literacy organization, such as the health department, the Junior League, a marketing firm, the unemployment office, a mental health association, and the public housing authority. In honor of this community—rather than single-agency—approach to literacy, the group decided to name the new network the Community of Readers.

Eight years later, the

ranging from 0 to 4.9 grade level. A book collection committee that includes staff, tutors, and students constantly reviews books and makes recommendations on new purchases. A strength of the program is the staff's experience in small-group instruction. Contact: Diane Rosenthal, 212-932-7920.

#### **Oakland Public**

**Library:** Located in the main library, the Second Start Adult Literacy program has sites in 14 of the 15 branches in the Oakland system in California. Through the use of oral history and language experience, Second Start has developed its own curriculum entitled "Oakland Readers." Formatted into four reading levels, the series reflects the reality of urban America through the eyes of the learner. It also includes student workbooks that were developed by learners. The Computer Learning Center is at the core of the program, providing a framework in which students can study. An important specialty of the program is the family literacy component. Parents and caregivers learn how to read to their children, how to choose appropriate children's books, and how to break the cycle of illiteracy. Contact: Leslie McGinnis, 510-238-3432.

**Onondaga County Public Library:** Located in central New York State, OCPL headquarters its literacy program in the central library and has sites in eight branches, two satellite locations, 18 member libraries, and seven community sites. The use of instructional technology is the

Community of Readers still meets every month at the Vance Chavis Library, one of Greensboro's oldest branches. Now the network includes over 50 organizations. Each month the members share their successes, learn from each other, and work together to solve problems. The network has spawned several collaborative family literacy programs and reading-promotion campaigns.

According to June Swanston-Valdes, director of the Black Child Development Institute, one of the charter members of the network, the Community of Readers has been a great asset for her organization. "Where else can you go every month and find everyone from the health department to the local universities all talking about reading and literacy?"

When Neerman reflects on the success of the Community of Readers, she notes that this community-based approach to literacy has been the single most effective

strategy for demonstrating to the city that librarians can be leaders, problem solvers, and



*Literacy volunteer tutors and ESL students in the central Queens Library Adult Learning Center.*

core of the program, with a significant software collection including CD-ROMs and Internet access. In addition, the program has extensive adult new reader and ESL collections. Both are accessible through a database that is searchable by subject and/or title and provides reading-level information. Program specialties include an ESL conversation

club. Contact: Milena Hansen, 315-435-1800.

**Queens Borough Public Library:** The Queens Library Adult Learning Centers provide services to learners through six comprehensive centers located at Central, Elmhurst, Flushing, Peninsula, Rochdale Village and Steinway libraries. The strength of this program is the commitment to small-group and learner-centered instruction, especially for students at or below a 3rd-grade level. The program offers a unique orientation process for tutors and learners to provide more information about the learning environment. Through the library a number of resources are available: the Job Information Center, the New Americans Program, and "Take Part, Take Pride." In addition, the program offers parent-child family literacy workshops. Contact: Carol Sheffer, 718-990-0818.

**Redwood City Public Library:** Project READ delivers service at the Redwood City, California, main library, two branches, and in North Fair Oaks. Offering four literacy programs that are all volunteer-based and focus on increasing literacy levels, the library's instructional mode is

community builders. "Our leadership in this area has led to a revitalization of the Friends of the Library, new funding for programs, and greater political clout. We have gained new lifelong library users and supporters. While helping hundreds of families improve their reading skills, we have also helped ourselves."

### *Literacy is a family value*

People often wonder why the nation is not solving the illiteracy problem faster. The answer is that illiteracy is often the result of growing up without good literacy models in the home, and there are simply not enough effective programs to assure that parents are able to improve their own literacy skills. Because nonreading parents tend to raise nonreading children, educators have concluded that family-based literacy programs are an effective way to break this self-perpetuating cycle of illiteracy. Such family literacy programs teach basic reading skills to parents using a family-oriented reading curriculum.

Children's librarians are uniquely qualified to develop

student centered and includes one-to-one tutoring, small-group instruction for limited-English-speaking parents, whole family literacy experiences, computer-aided instruction, and tutoring of children by adult and teen mentors. This strong student-centered approach offers opportunities for students to hold membership in "Friends of Literacy" and the advisory board, as well as participate in organizing fundraising events. Contact: Kathy Endaya, 415-780-7077.

**Richmond Public Library:** The Literacy for Every Adult Project (LEAP) is housed in the Main Library Learning Center of the Richmond Public Library in California. Services are also delivered at two branches as well as Parchester Village. Notable for its use of computers in library-based literacy and tutorial programs throughout the state, LEAP offers more than 150 software and CD titles for adults and children. The program's specialties include learner-centered instruction and innovative tutor training, which corresponds to the software collection and covers topics such as phonics, sight words, sentence structure, comprehension, and basic writing skills. The tutor training held each month focuses on a different topic at each session. Contact: Isabel Emerson, 510-307-8084.

**Robinson Township Public Library:** The Adult Literacy Partners Program serves learners at the Robinson Township main library, two branches, and the Robinson Correctional Center, located in rural southeastern Illinois. The program primarily offers one-on-one instruction with a specialty in peer inmate tutoring. In addition, a family literacy curriculum is offered. Student involvement includes selecting learning materials and preparing progress reports. Contact: Beth Hawkins, 618-544-2917.

**San Francisco Public Library:** Housed at the main library, Project READ serves 27 branches and 12 community agencies. Specializing in one-on-one instruction,

and lead such family literacy programs. The Glenwood Library has developed a Family Learning Program in partnership with a local elementary school in a low-income neighborhood. The library staff trained volunteers from the Junior League who come to the library every week to provide literacy activities for parents and their children.

Another family literacy model is the Motherhead project sponsored by the Chavis Library, in partnership with an anti-poverty organization called Uplift. Children's librarian Bea Shaw goes to the public-housing community center every week, where several families come to learn reading techniques. In this project, the adult learners are empowered to make decisions about the curriculum and the organization of the program. This learner-centered, participatory approach is based on a respect for the learners' culture and expertise.

Lou Sua, librarian at the Chavis Library, discovered that learner-centered literacy work can empower adult students to move out of the shadows and into leadership roles in their communities. Sua coordinated a program called Par-

Project READ has developed a binder of materials that includes tips and information on tutoring. Offered on a limited basis, small-group instruction includes workshops on skill topics such as phonics, spelling, and writing. Student activities also include outreach presentations, a learner's newsletter, family-literacy events, and social-recognition events. Contact: Ana Linder, 415-557-4390.

**Santa Clara County Public Library:** The SCCPL Reading Program provides services through the main county library and nine of its branches as well as the Santa Clara, Mountain View, and Sunnyvale Public Libraries, several community centers and recovery houses, and a jail. One-on-one tutoring is offered, with some small-group instruction in math. Computer-aided instruction is a strength of this program, which has developed software in civic education and budgeting and shopping, as well as a curriculum gear for low-level learners. Program specialties include corrections (using inmates as volunteers); family literacy; and working with substance abuse houses, work furlough programs, and a drug treatment program for pregnant women. Contact: Taylor Willingham, 408-262-1349.

**Waukegan Public Library:** The Libraries for Literacy program delivers services at 75 sites, including 18 public libraries, churches, park districts, hospitals, Head Start sites, high school adult evening school programs, and tutors' work sites. The program recently opened a site at a local mall, which provides high visibility and traffic for the program. The program offers one-on-one tutoring and ESL small-group instruction, along with "drop-in" learning at the mall. Each library has a new-reader collection, and the literacy staff provide an annual in-service for library staff, to improve their new reader collections. The program has implemented several innovative instructional methods including a book discussion group and a readers' theater. Program specialties include tutoring for family and workplace literacy, student involvement, and publishing. Contact: Carol Morris, 847-623-2041.

ents Learning Together for women living in public housing.

"Many of these women didn't believe that they could read and write very well," Sua said. "We used a very non-traditional curriculum including newspapers, magazines, cookbooks, soap operas, and computers as our instructional materials. We used the entire library." Sua added that after a few months, most of the women had achieved a new level of confidence in their literacy skills and consequently many of them made some major changes in their lives.

### **Add technology to the mix**

Lena Gonzalez, who coordinates English as a second language (ESL) classes for immigrants at the Glenwood Library, has found that computers can be an effective teaching tool. In addition to commercial ESL software programs, she finds that a simple word processor is valuable for whole-language reading and writing activities.

"Computers allow students to easily type or dictate their own stories. Then these student-produced writings become part of the class curriculum." For more-advanced learners, Gonzalez and students developed a special class that taught them how to write and produce a newsletter.

An ESL teacher for several years before she became a librarian, Gonzalez says that "the ability to click the mouse and leap to a home page about your home country is very meaningful to a refugee or immigrant who is feeling homesick or a student who wants to show others in the class what his or her home country is really like."

Advanced ESL students are now working to create their own home pages on the Web. Each group of students is making its own decisions about how they want their native country represented. In conjunction with the local newspaper, the ESL class will host a "Multicultural Week" on the Web beginning July 4. Gonzalez observes that "since every student's home page will have an e-mail response option, I assume that the students will have lots of opportunities to practice reading and writing in English."

As the nation moves into the Information Age, we cannot afford to leave anyone behind. Yet, according to some estimates, existing literacy programs reach only about 10% of the 40 to 50 million adults who need them. Libraries can be at the forefront of the effort to stem this growing crisis.

Librarians have to make sure that the very same resources we provide to the literate customer are also available for those whose literacy is emerging. That means our technology, collections, facilities, and staff must support literacy. It means that each library's program could look very different from the others but that all of them are based on the needs and the goals of the learners themselves.

If we involve literacy students in planning and evaluating our programs, we will not only be assured of better programs, but we will also be building a deep and long-lasting sense of community with these men and women. This is ultimately the best way to break the cycle of illiteracy and create a true community of readers. ♦

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