

Literacy Triumphs, Challenges Largely Borne by Volunteers

The Washington Post

October 5, 2006 Thursday, Final Edition

Copyright 2006 The Washington Post



Section: Montgomery Extra; T04

Length: 638 words

Byline: Pam Saussy

Body

Since 1963, the **Literacy** Council of Montgomery County has been helping adults to improve their **literacy** skills. At a time when immigration, consideration of English as the "official" language and standards of learning are key issues, the council works with hundreds of adults, native and foreign-born, to improve their levels of reading, writing and speaking English. Council Executive Director Pamela Saussy of Potomac began **volunteering** with the organization in 1997 and became its director in 2001. She writes about the organization and the people it serves.

Try to imagine going through life unable to read, write or speak English. Imagine struggling to understand package labels, bus schedules, medication instructions, bills and bank statements. Imagine trying to be understood by a doctor, a police officer or your child's teacher. Applying for a job -- and keeping it -- might be the most difficult task of all. That's the situation facing thousands of American and foreign-born adults in Montgomery County.

Because Montgomery County is home to almost half of Maryland's immigrant population, it's easy to assume that this alone accounts for low **literacy** levels in the county. However, within our well-educated county lives a virtually invisible group of native-born Americans who might be able to read well enough to decode simple words, yet not well enough to understand a news article or even the back of a cereal box. Many have kept their problem hidden for years. They may be highly intelligent but have special needs that prevented them from learning in a traditional classroom environment. Whether foreign- or native-born, all of these adults need basic **literacy** skills to get better jobs, support their children's education and participate fully in society.

For nearly 43 years, the **Literacy** Council of Montgomery County has helped adults obtain essential **literacy** and English skills. We train **volunteers** to provide free, one-on-one or small-group tutoring in our English-as-a-second-language and basic **literacy** programs. In the past year, more than 500 **literacy** council **volunteers** donated more than 37,000 hours of service, teaching close to 800 students. That's the good news. The bad news is that there are 350 more people still on our waiting list. More arrive at our door nearly every day.

Our students may have had little or no formal education in their native country, while others have completed high school or even college before coming to the United States. They cite a variety of goals for learning English: to help their children in school, get a driver's license, open their own businesses, become U.S. citizens.

The council's students present us with new **challenges** every day, such as figuring out how to fit tutoring sessions between multiple jobs and helping a woman living under the veil learn English without sacrificing her privacy.

Literacy Triumphs, Challenges Largely Borne by Volunteers

Students come to us because they can't afford tuition-based classes, because they require flexible scheduling to accommodate work or family obligations, or because they need individualized instruction to learn.

Accomplishments that we take for granted, such as conversations with store clerks, bank tellers, pharmacists and landlords, are significant achievements for our students. **Literacy** council students proudly tell us how they mastered the bus system, negotiated a home purchase, completed a job application, attended a parent-teacher conference or read a book to their child.

Literacy changes lives, and **volunteers** are the key to our success. Any adult who can read, write and speak English fluently can become a tutor. No teaching experience or knowledge of a foreign language is necessary. As **literacy** council tutors will tell you, watching students and their families move forward with new hope and confidence is incredibly rewarding.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: **LITERACY** & ILLITERACY (90%); ASSOCIATIONS & ORGANIZATIONS (90%); CHILDREN (89%); LANGUAGE ACQUISITION (89%); **VOLUNTEERS** (89%); STUDENTS & STUDENT LIFE (88%); MULTILINGUALISM (78%); IMMIGRATION (78%); CITIZENSHIP (78%); LANGUAGE & LANGUAGES (78%); EXECUTIVES (76%); EMPLOYMENT SEARCH (68%)

Geographic: MARYLAND, USA (79%); UNITED STATES (94%)

Load-Date: October 5, 2006