

Starting new chapter

Volunteers open doors by helping adults learn to read

By EDWARD L. KENNEY • The News Journal
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For most of his life, 50-year-old Mike Kennedy got by without knowing how to read – and without letting people know about it.

He sometimes faked his way through situations, like the time someone at work pointed out a joke on the Internet. Kennedy stared at it for a while and then laughed as though he knew what it said.

But it got progressively harder to pretend. Especially at his last job as a tow-truck driver.

"They used to tell you where to go," he said of the pickup routes. "Now they text-message you, or it comes over a little computer screen."

He lost that job three years ago.

Kennedy, who still does not have a full-time job – he has been turned down at places like McDonald's for not being able to read or fill out a job application – decided to do something about it.

Entering his sixth decade, the Newark resident took the courageous step of asking for a reading tutor.

He started in March with Literacy Volunteers Serving Adults, and he went from not being able to read anything to reading almost everything he sees, although he knows he still has a lot to learn.

"There's nothing that goes by me that I do not try to read, things that are on television that have words, things that come in the mail," he said. "Now it's starting to click a little bit. I'm not a scholar reading. But I'm proud of what I'm doing, because I couldn't have done this last year."

In an age of computers, text messaging and electronic books, stories about people like Kennedy are startling. But 32 million people in the United States read at or below an eighth-grade level, according to Syracuse, N.Y.-based ProLiteracy, whose national membership programs include

Literacy Volunteers Serving Adults.

Barry Benson, a spokesman for ProLiteracy, refers to that number -- about 10 percent of the population -- as an "epidemic." Not only do they contribute to a loss of work-force productivity, he said, they play a large part in rates for crime, teen pregnancy, drug abuse and homelessness.

"It's all traceable back to literacy issues," he said.

U.S. Rep. Dan Maffei, D-N.Y., recently sponsored the creation of the first Congressional Adult Literacy Caucus to help bring light to the issue.

The caucus will look to get more people with reading problems into the work force, to bring national attention to their plight and to get peers in Congress to understand the urgency of the issue, Benson said.

"There are not too many jobs out there without some form of paperwork component or forms that have to be filled out," he said. "And a good many jobs include computer literacy."

Groups such as Literacy Volunteers Serving Adults work in communities to help adults with reading and language problems. Since being founded in a basement in 1983, LVSA has grown to 87 volunteer tutors working with 131 adults. The group has helped more than 2,500 people.

"Currently, we have about 77 percent of people learning English because English isn't their first language," said Cindy Shermeyer, executive director.



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"It's not that the readers aren't out there. It's just easier to say I need to learn the language than to say, 'I'm 50 and I can't read.'"

She said stories like Kennedy's are familiar.

"Folks come up with really inventive ways to cover up the fact they can't read when they're working on the job," she said. "It's not unusual for someone to say they forgot their glasses, can you read this for them?"

Vrendia Ridyolph, 44, of Wilmington, who has struggled with reading and has been receiving tutoring with LVSA for about eight months, has had her share of embarrassing moments, including trying to fill out forms at a doctor's office.

"There are moments when you are asked to spell something, and you are sweating bullets," she said. "You're ashamed to be 40-something years old and not know how to read when people put you on the spot. It is embarrassing.

"I felt like I was all alone, like the world was passing me by," she said. "Because I didn't know how to read as well, I didn't go to college. It's like everyone is smarter than you, and you're the only one who is having these problems."

Ridyolph, a self-employed home and office cleaner, has gained confidence since getting tutored. She encourages others to follow her example.

"Sometimes you don't want to go because you're too embarrassed," she said. "I guarantee, if they go out there to do this, they'll be very pleased they did it."

Joanne Ushery-Benson, 55, of Wilmington, has been receiving help for about eight months. She said it was an embarrassing moment during Bible study that provoked her.

"One night I was at church and I was reading and I couldn't read the Bible correctly, and I thought, 'I need to go back to school,' " she said. "I've been wanting to go back to school for a long time, but I never could get up the courage to walk through those doors again."

Improving her reading skills is taking her to places she could never go before, she said.

"In reading a book, I can go around the world," said Ushery-Benson, who is disabled and does volunteer

work. "It opens up a whole different way of life, because when you can't read, you're limited, and you don't feel as good about yourself. It just came to me, you can't run forever. I needed that for me, and I got it through the literacy program."

People who cannot read often must find alternative ways to get by. Kennedy said he took his driver's license test verbally and he sometimes asked his 14-year-old son, Mike Jr., to help him with something he needs to read.

"When I buy cold medicine, I always take him with me, and he reads the boxes," he said.

Last weekend, the group held its annual major fundraiser, a Scrabble event called Spellebration, which brought in about \$8,000. But the biggest need is tutors, Shermeyer said, as their waiting lists attest.

Ruth Williams of New Castle, who is in her mid-50s, is a former public-school teacher who started tutoring with LVSA two years ago. She is tutoring Kennedy, who graduated from Rising Sun High School.

Williams said she has noticed that many of the older adults who cannot read were pushed through high school in the days before special programs.

"If they were identified [with a learning problem], they didn't have a program for them," she said of these older students. "If you didn't have any behavior problem, you were pushed through school and given some kind of certificate."



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For the time being, Kennedy drives cars to dealerships part time to earn some money. But he wants to be ready when the economy improves to be better equipped to get a job.

"Until they tell me I can't come back no more, I'm going to be there," he said of his twice-weekly tutoring. "I'm proud, and I'm proud of what they've done for me."

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Purchase this Photo
Mike Kennedy, 50, of Newark, reads flash cards with Ruth Williams, a tutor with Literacy Volunteers Serving Adults. After not being able to find a full-time job for three years, Kennedy decided it was time to learn to read. (The News Journal/GINGER WALL)

HOW TO HELP

Visit the Literacy Volunteers Serving Adults/Northern Delaware Inc. website at www.litvolunteers.org or call 658-5624 to volunteer as a tutor. The next tutor training session will be held in January.



Purchase this Photo
Volunteer Becky Arnold (left) works with Vrendia Ridyolph, 44, of Wilmington. Ridyolph said she has gained confidence since getting tutored. (The News Journal/ROBERT CRAIG)



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