

## 2013 SPOTLIGHT ON ACHIEVEMENT AND SERVICE AWARDS

Secretary of State Jesse White along with Dennis DeRossett, executive director of the Illinois Press Association (IPA), presented awards to 10 adult learners and seven volunteer tutors (three winners were unable to attend) at the annual Spotlight on Achievement and Service Awards ceremony in May. Adult learner winners received \$200 from the IPA Foundation, a plaque and a personalized *Illinois Blue Book*. Volunteer winners received \$200 from the IPA Foundation for the literacy program where they tutor as well as a plaque and a personalized *Illinois Blue Book*.



**2013 Spotlight on Achievement Winners** - Standing left to right: Dennis DeRossett, executive director, Illinois Press Association; Xiao Ying Zhang, Regional Office of Education – Monroe/Randolph Counties, Chester; Nathan Watson, Frontier Community College, Fairfield; Vonda Ottwell, John Wood Community College, Quincy; Jim Niehoff, Arlington Heights Memorial Library, Arlington Heights; Anna Moran, Albany Park Community Center, Chicago; Secretary of State Jesse White. Seated left to right: Tennie Fitts, South Suburban College, South Holland; Gloria Crosby, De La Salle Tolton, Chicago; Angelica Cortes, Corazon a Corazon, Chicago; Emmitt Cole, Richland Community College's Project READ, Decatur; Sadia Bachir, Albany Park Community Center, Chicago.

## **Adult learner winners' stories:**

### **Sadia Bachir, Albany Park Community Center, Chicago**

Growing up in a rural, Berber area of Algeria, school was neither convenient nor encouraged for Sadia. When she moved to the United States in 1986, she was unable to focus on her own education because she had three young children at home. Since she had never been to school, she had no idea what learning involved -- until her children started to attend school. She felt bad when she saw her children studying but she was unable to help them. So she turned to Albany Park Community Center for help. When she began to study, she didn't even know how to hold a pencil. However, she soon began to understand how learning works and how to be a role model for her children. Although family activities and illnesses made it hard for her to attend all of the tutoring sessions, she has never given up. Her persistence has paid off with increased English proficiency. Now she can go grocery shopping, find the food she wants, and understand both the prices and the sales. Because she can read addresses, she can go to appointments by herself rather than wait for friends to take her. She is not afraid to answer the phone or to venture out by herself. Her family is very proud of her achievements. Before learning to read, life was dark for her, now it is a rainbow of many colors and lights.

### **Emmitt Cole, Richland Community College's Project READ, Decatur**

Since he was in grade school, Emmitt had lived his life trying to hide the fact that he couldn't read. To avoid being called upon to read in class, he would start talking or put his head down on his desk. He left his textbooks in his locker so he wouldn't have to read them aloud. If he was disruptive, he would be sent to the dean's office and then he wouldn't have to take tests. He decided he would rather be uncooperative than have anyone know he couldn't read. Without the ability to read, school became too hard. Since he also needed to take care of his mother, he just dropped out. Continuing to hide his reading problem, Emmitt found lots of jobs. But problems cropped up. Once he was asked to read at a safety meeting, so he left the meeting and quit a week later. At another job, he survived as a supervisor because an employee helped him complete the reports. When the company wanted him to move up into management, he refused and eventually was laid off. Living like that was exhausting. The breaking point came one day when he was playing a video game with his son and could not read the game directions. He didn't want that to ever happen again. So, he talked to the unemployment office and they referred him to Project READ. On the day of his first appointment at Project READ, Emmitt sat in the parking lot trying to calm his fears and overcome his shame. At first, he was embarrassed, wouldn't make eye contact, and constantly apologized. But as his reading and math skills improved, his confidence increased. For the first time, he is excited about learning. He started a new job that required him to take a math test and he had one of the best scores of the group. It is a work in progress but his life looks promising as he continues to study at Project READ.

### **Angelica Cortes, Corazon a Corazon, Chicago**

When Angelica needed help to learn English, she turned to Corazon a Corazon. Although she is a hard worker, she was laid off. She is determined to try again and get another job. Angelica kept the family together when both she and her husband were unemployed. As her English improves, her confidence is improving and her job options

are greater. She is working very hard to pay the tuition for her son to attend a boarding school. She hopes that an excellent education will provide him with more opportunities than she had. In addition to learning English, Angelica volunteers to help at Corazon. She will answer the door, take phone messages and clean the facility. Because she is a friend to other students, and helps them with their studies, she has helped Corazon to become better known in the neighborhood. Angelica was inspired by her son's teacher, who frequently stayed after class to help both Angelica and her son. She has received so much help from the community that she wants to give back.

### **Gloria Crosby, De La Salle Tolton, Chicago**

When Gloria first came to Tolton Center 3 ½ years ago, she was withdrawn, insecure and afraid of failure. She had a great desire to help her five children and four foster children with schoolwork. So she came to the Tolton Center to improve her reading, writing, and math skills. As she became confident as a learner, she assumed leadership roles in school activities. She is now a mentor to new students and a tutor in the GED math class. Even her relationship with her husband improved and her children admire all that she has accomplished. With time, patience, guidance from the Tolton staff and with her own willingness to work, Gloria has been transformed. She never thought she could learn to do difficult math, read with understanding, write an essay, speak in front of others and still be smiling as she took on those challenges. Yet she has done all of these things. She participates in class activities by going to the black board to demonstrate how to solve a math problem or to correct a sentence. Gloria's new goals are to attend a program in medical technology and work at a local hospital. "Learn NOW and every minute of every day" is the new motto of the Crosby household.

### **Tennie Fitts, South Suburban College, South Holland**

Several years ago, Tennie suffered a brain aneurysm. Although she has recovered physically, that traumatic brain injury left her with reading difficulties. Traumatic brain injuries are frustrating disabilities because what one learns one week may be forgotten the next. Tennie works as a shelf stocker at a large retail establishment. Like others who have difficulty reading, Tennie found ways to cope. Since she can't read labels and she didn't want to have to open boxes, she memorized all the items to be stocked in her aisle. So one of her tasks with her tutor was to study the words on the product labels that she needed to shelve. As she got better and better at this task, it made her job easier, and made her feel better about herself. Her perseverance is amazing. Tennie works almost 40 hours a week on the night shift, but even when she is tired, she meets with her tutor. She is excited to learn because she wants to better herself. She is no longer embarrassed to ask questions or to speak in front of people. Life is better for her.

### **Anna Moran, Albany Park Community Center, Chicago**

Anna always wanted to learn and to be able to do the same tasks as her classmates in school, but somehow this didn't work out for her. She was passed from grade to grade without being able to read well. Teachers ignored her difficulties or mistreated her. She grew into an adult with very negative feelings associated with reading. Despite all of her earlier struggles to learn to read, and maybe because of her struggles, she made a point for her three children to get a good education and to excel in school. Finally, it was her turn. When a piece of reading was placed in front of her at her first tutoring session, she transformed into person who was shy and unsure of herself. After months of hard work

with her tutor, Anna has greatly improved her reading ability and her self-confidence. For the first time, she can fully interact with a world which is filled with the written word. Although she was unable to help her own children, Anna is now able to help her grandchildren with their homework and to read to them. Her goal is to get her GED and then go on to college. She wants to give back to the community and work with adults and handicapped children.

### **Jim Niehoff, Arlington Heights Memorial Library, Arlington Heights**

Imagine waking up one day and discovering you are no longer you. Once you were a respected, accomplished communicator. Now you have to relearn basic words in order to speak, read and write. What you have is called aphasia, which is the loss of the ability to communicate through speech or through writing. Every aspect of your life is affected. This is what Jim faced when he suffered a stroke as a result of an accident at the age of 44. The doctors were not sure he would live, much less walk and talk. Jim faced extensive rehabilitation and speech therapy. When therapy ended, he needed to find other resources, that's when he found the Arlington Heights Memorial Library. When he began working with his tutor, he would speak using simple nouns and verbs to communicate. Sometimes it was like a game of charades to figure out what he was trying to say. His first goal was to speak and write sentences. As difficult as this was, Jim never stopped trying. Through Jim's hard work week after week, he began to make progress. Speaking and writing sentences is still difficult and takes a long time but Jim is committed to learning and welcomes the challenge. As Jim recovers his ability to read, his frustrations have lessened. Being able to read has helped him feel less isolated and alone. He has talked about his stroke recovery to other groups because he wants to help others who face what he did. The message he carries in his heart and is now able to say to others is also in the speech he gives to recovery groups. His last line says it all, "Don't Give Up!"

### **Vonda Ottwell, John Wood Community College, Quincy**

Vonda was placed in special education classes in school and told that she couldn't learn. She still didn't think she could learn, especially at her age. But she knew she needed to pass the GED to get a job and she wanted to be able to read to her grandsons. When she entered the literacy program at John Wood Community, she admitted she seldom read on her own and that when she did, she read "backwards." She began the journey to learn to read by working with a tutor. What a discovery she found! She was able to learn! Her world began to open up. She can now read her Bible and participate in Bible studies. Although her first writing attempts were just sentences, now she composes complete essays. Her math skills have improved dramatically. Once she started learning she didn't want to stop. She is preparing for each section of the GED test. Each accomplishment led to another causing her to want to continue to the next challenge. Vonda's tutors gave her the help and encouragement she needed to do more with her academic skills than she thought possible. Her life is changed and receiving her GED certificate is on the horizon.

### **Nathan Watson, Frontier Community College, Fairfield**

Because Nathan has ADHD, he has struggled to learn since he was a little boy. He was in trouble at school much of his life and didn't get encouragement either at school or home. When he graduated with a High School diploma, he could only read at a fourth

grade level. But Nathan has a goal. He wants to be independent and to live on his own. It is hard for him to sit still, but he patiently works with his tutor every week. He completes his homework assignments and is eager to please his tutor. With his tutor's help, he is working hard to improve his math skills so he can manage his own money. Since he started working with a tutor and improved his reading skills, he received a promotion at work. He not only makes more money, but they trust him to do more which makes him feel better about himself. With his improved reading skills, he can now read the newspaper to look for even better paying jobs. Nathan has overcome a lot of negativity in his life. He has struggled and fought to survive his whole life. With the support and encouragement of the literacy program, he has made significant changes and is on his way to becoming independent.

**Xiao Ying Zhang, Regional Office of Education – Monroe/Randolph Counties, Chester**

When Xiao Ying came to the United States from China five years ago with her eight year old son, she spoke little English. When she was pregnant with her second child, she sought help from the literacy program. With her tutor's help, she researched medical insurance online and filed the necessary paperwork. When her child was born five weeks early, she studied children's health issues with her tutor so she could care for her child. She is confident when she communicates with the pediatrician and with daycare providers. She works as a restaurant manager six days a week while caring for her family which now consists of her 13 year old son and a two year old. Even with her busy schedule, she makes time to learn English so she can better serve her customers and her family. She wants to be an example for her children and she wants them to do well in school. Recently she researched what she needed to do to become a U.S. citizen. With her tutor's help, she passed her citizenship test last fall. Taking the naturalization oath was the happiest day of Xiao Ying's life. Now she is applying for U.S. citizenship for her teenage son and working with her tutor to learn how to buy a house. Her family will soon be living the American dream.



**2013 Spotlight on Service Winners** - Standing left to right: Dennis DeRossett, executive director, Illinois Press Association; Leatrice Saffore, former adult learner at De La Salle/Tolton Center, Chicago, and guest speaker; Robert Boone, Oakton Community College, Skokie; Barbara Worner, YWCA Adult Literacy, Pekin; Norman Weinberg, De La Salle/Tolton Center, Chicago; Secretary of State Jesse White. Seated left to right: Cheryl Stolz, C.E.F.S. Literacy Center, Effingham; Audrey Colby, Albany Park Community Center, Chicago; Laurie Tyler, Black Hawk College, Moline; Linda Berry, Kaskaskia College, Centralia. (Not in picture: Stuart Harris and Eugene Swedo, Township High School District 214 Community Education, Arlington Heights; Alice Mora, Corazon a Corazon, Chicago)

#### **Volunteer tutor winners' stories:**

##### **Linda Berry, Kaskaskia College, Centralia**

Four and half years ago, when she retired, Linda became a volunteer tutor with Reading Link at Kaskaskia College. Books have been her constant companion since she learned to read even before she attended school. She found it hard to imagine being an adult and not being able to read. Now Linda is constantly on the lookout for books and items she can purchase that will interest her learner. She also checks The Reading Link library for new books that might benefit her learner. After a lesson, she will use the extra items she has found as a way to keep the sessions interesting and fun for her learner. Last December, Linda fell and broke her hip. She was not able to meet with her learner for a couple of months but she kept in contact with him and gave him assignments over the phone. She is very dedicated to helping others improve their literacy skills.

### **Robert S. Boone, Oakton Community College, Skokie**

When Bob started to volunteer as a tutor at Oakton Community College, he helped with the Bridges to Academic Writing class. This is a literacy class that prepares ESL students for college level writing through reading, responding and writing. Because he has a strong interest in creative writing, he soon began to teach that as well. Bob finds ways to make learning fun. He encourages students to tell their stories, to read and to share. For those who need a little extra help, Bob meets with them outside of class. He offers "Conversation Lunches" in the cafeteria. These have proved to be a great opportunity for relaxed free expression. The unique rapport Bob has with his students helps them improve their self-confidence and reach their literacy goals. He's introduced a love of language to his students. Of all the volunteer work Bob does, he enjoys teaching creative writing to adult learners the most.

### **Audrey Colby, Albany Park Community Center, Chicago**

Audrey began tutoring two women from Yemen who had little education in their native language. She developed such a positive relationship with them that they invited her to a family wedding. When they returned to Yemen after working with Audrey for almost two years, their English skills had improved greatly. She was also tutoring a third woman from Yemen. This happily married woman had some education in Yemen and was raising six children. She wanted to become a U.S. citizen but failed her first interview. So they worked together to improve her English and to help her re-take her naturalization interview. Unfortunately, during the time they were working together, Audrey was diagnosed with cancer. The literacy program fully expected Audrey to take time off for her chemotherapy and radiation treatments but she did not. She continued tutoring this mother, just arranging tutoring around her treatment schedule. Each week Audrey would come to Albany Park wearing different hats and hairstyles, getting thinner and weaker but always cheerful. She was determined to work with her adult learner who was now pregnant with her seventh child and experiencing her own level of discomfort. Audrey finished her treatments and recovered her hair and energy. After her learner had her child, Audrey tutored her at her home so she wouldn't lose momentum. Last November, this mother of seven passed her naturalization interview and became a U.S. citizen. Without Audrey's dedication, this would not have happened.

### **Stuart Harris, Township High School District 214 Community Education, Arlington Heights**

After retiring a few years ago, Stu saw a notice in the Arlington Heights Library asking for volunteer tutors for the District 214 Read to Learn program. This appealed to him so he joined the program as a volunteer tutor. He has tutored several adult learners. They have all been very sincere in their desire to improve their English and very appreciative of the help they received. Stu enjoys learning from his students as they learn from him. He seeks to establish a partnership with his adult learners, often meeting them outside of class time and over the long winter and summer breaks. Stu also stays in touch with many of his past adult learners. He spends hours of his time researching topics of interest for his learners. One of his students was from Iran and she thought the class would not be interesting. After her first class, she was surprised at all she had learned and she continued on to improve her English. Another student from South Korea improved her English and self-confidence so she was able to get a job. She was thrilled to be earning her own money for the first time. A third student was from Japan and was

very nervous about her new life in the U.S. The Read to Learn class helped her relax, improve her English and enjoy her life here. Stu mentors new volunteer tutors and is always willing to share his experience with them. He is flexible and willing to help whenever and wherever needed.

### **Alice Mora, Corazon a Corazon, Chicago**

Alice is a mother of five and has lived in Chicago's south side her whole life. She was not only dedicated to her children but she always found time to be active in her community. Alice is known as an "unsung hero" who has gone beyond her expected duties. She volunteers with Corazon as an ESL and citizenship tutor and she volunteers in her parish. Because of Alice's true devotion and commitment, her students have improved their self confidence and achieved many of their goals. Her students have been able to get jobs, pay bills, write checks and take care of an ill mother. They are better able to participate in parent-teacher conferences and doctor visits. She is adored by her students. Anyone can volunteer, but not everyone does it with joy and a whole heart like Alice does.

### **Cheryl Stolz, C.E.F.S. Literacy Center, Effingham**

Ever since Cheryl took a class called "Teaching Adults to Read" in graduate school, she has wanted to teach adults to read. She was also inspired by her four sisters who dropped out of high school and but then worked very hard to earn their GEDs. It takes real commitment and dedication for an adult learner to go back to school. Cheryl has been a volunteer tutor for 31 years spending 10 of those years with C.E.F.S. She also provides language and writing skills to a small group of learners once a week. Cheryl was a teacher for many years and tutoring continues to provide her with the satisfaction and stimulation she had with classroom students. She has worked with several learners ranging from an ABE learner who did not know the alphabet to an ESL learner who wanted to improve her communication with her children's teachers and doctors. Being diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis has never kept Cheryl from meeting with her adult learners. She encourages potential tutors to "Enjoy what you are doing and remember how important this commitment is for the student. They may be sacrificing a lot more than your volunteer time."

### **Eugene Swedo, Township High School District 214 Community Education, Arlington Heights**

Eugene's parents had no more than a third grade education when they migrated to the U.S. When he began elementary school and learning English, his parents also wanted to learn. Eugene along with his two brothers helped their Mom and Dad learn the English language. His Dad was able to become self-employed with his new language skills. When Eugene retired from his job in 1992, he wanted something to do. A friend told him about the Read to Learn program at District 214. He checked it out and has been there ever since. Eugene volunteers at two different sites twice a week. He has spent a number of enjoyable years as a volunteer tutor working with many different learners who have eagerly applied themselves to reach their goals. He will research articles and materials on his own time that will be of interest to his learners. He is compassionate, flexible and willing to do whatever needs to be done. Eugene considers it a privilege to be able to volunteer as a tutor in the Read to Learn program.

### **Laurie Tyler, Black Hawk College, Moline**

When Laurie retired from Deere & Company she wanted to do something new to fill her time. She began volunteering as a tutor at Black Hawk College's Literacy is for Everyone (LIFE) Program. When learners need someone to help them as they struggle, they request Laurie. She is kind and patient with each of her learners no matter what their reading level or background. The learners end up trusting her with the fears and insecurities that have prevented them from learning in the past. Once she gets to know her learner, she searches the internet for articles, stories, biographies and information on subjects they might find interesting in addition to the books in the LIFE library. She has found that when students are learning about something they really enjoy, they learn much quicker. Laurie encouraged the literacy program to start a bi-monthly Tutor Think Tank. This gives both new and veteran tutors an opportunity to share ideas about how they tutor and how to motivate adult learners. Laurie wrote a couple of pieces on tutoring strategies for the first Tutor Think Tank that are now standard tutor training documents. She is inspired by her students because they face difficulties each day but seldom complain and always make the time for tutoring.

### **Norman Weinberg, De La Salle/Tolton Center, Chicago**

Ten years ago, when Norman and his wife were discussing what they would do when they retired, his wife suggested that Norman teach. He had managed a small family manufacturing business on the south side of Chicago for over 30 years but he didn't have any experience teaching. One day he was reading a local newspaper and there was an article about Blue Gargoyle needing volunteer tutors. He was not retired yet but he called and said "I think I'd like to tutor." They immediately enrolled him in training, where he discovered that his area of expertise was mathematics. He was matched with adult learners who needed to pass the GED test and especially the math section. He developed a deep respect for the uphill battle that adult learners face. When Blue Gargoyle closed in 2009, he joined the program at the Tolton Center. One of the students he tutored had dropped out high school to help with family expenses. At age 34 she was determined to complete the GED test. Over a two year period, she passed six of the seven parts of the test. The last section, math, was the most difficult for her. They worked together on math, and he was rewarded when she passed that part and completed her GED. Once he fully retired, he moved from the south side. But he continues to tutor students at the Tolton Center and also 20 hours a week at a community college. Many of the adult learners he works with have attended public schools, but never received a diploma. Many are new immigrants. Some students work at least one full-time job while attending school. However, they are all diligent and enthusiastic to be working towards their goal. Norman loves seeing his students have the "a-ha" moment when a math concept "clicks" in their head. He enjoys knowing that he is part of the process of opening doors in their lives.

### **Barbara Worner, YWCA Adult Literacy, Pekin**

After moving back to central Illinois, Barbara read in the newspaper about a volunteer opportunity at the YWCA Adult Literacy Program in Pekin. After she completed the training, she was matched with a doctor from Bolivia. This man gave up his medical practice to bring his 12 year old stepson to the U.S. where he would have more opportunities. Soon Barb was working not only with the doctor, but with his wife, his two adult daughters and the 12 year old boy. She continued to work with the family even

after she was hired full time as an ESL instructor and later promoted to ESL coordinator at a local college. She made the 80 minute round trip drive to Pekin twice a week while also establishing a successful after school and summer program for low-income children in her community. In late 2009, Barb was diagnosed with Stage 4 cancer. She left her paid and volunteer jobs to undergo treatment. She returned to tutoring in June 2012 when her cancer was in remission. Unfortunately, that fall, a different cancer returned. Barb is never without a smile and words of hope. She brushes off her illness as she continues to tutor. "Little things to us are a huge success to them," she says. When Barb invited her current learner and his family to Thanksgiving dinner, they were shocked that her home had 24-hour electricity and hot water. In their home country of Uzbekistan, electricity is available only three hours a day and the only hot water is what you heat yourself. Barb says ESL learners are every teacher's dream students. They want more class time, they do their homework, respond with kindness and respect. She is grateful to the YWCA for their excellent program and support.