

2008 SPOTLIGHT ON ACHIEVEMENT WINNERS

Burnice Blair, Common Place Family Learning Center, Peoria

After raising her children and retiring from her job, Burnice Blair now had time to do something for herself. She wanted to learn to read and write but she thought she was too old. With encouragement from her family, Burnice called Common Place Family Learning Center and found out that you are never too old to learn. In just two years, Burnice acquired new skills like driving out of town to her children's homes without fear of getting lost, like balancing her checkbook and understanding her bills without her daughter's help. She is now hosting a Bible study group in her home. And she attended the New Readers for New Life Conference in Galesburg with her fellow adult learners. She has embraced learning.

Marco Ceja, Waukegan Public Library as a partner in Lake County Adult Learning Connection, Waukegan

Because Marco Ceja's family moved frequently when he was a child, he attended more than 20 different schools. Struggling with reading, he never stayed in one school long enough to get help. In fact, he was encouraged to drop out of high school. But he refused to leave without a diploma so he was placed in a special vocational program to finish high school. He still sought to improve his reading and writing skills after finishing high school. Literacy programs in other states told him they could not help him. He was rejected by the military and denied voting privileges because he could not read. Determined to learn to read, Marco enrolled in the literacy program at Lake County Adult Learning Connection and in automotive classes at College of Lake County. Soon after enrolling in the automotive class, his instructor recommended him for a job at a car dealership based on his determination and hard work. Marco has since been offered a new job at an auto body shop. Since improving his reading and writing skills his life is so much better. He can read mail, street signs, work orders and even read and understand a book. Also, for the first time, he voted.

Michael Dellar, Blue Gargoyle Community Services, Chicago

Michael Dellar had a difficult childhood, filled with experiences no child should have to endure. But perhaps those hard times helped him to develop a strong sense of self-preservation and a desire to be more. Until two years ago, Michael was unable to read or write. However, the remarkable progress he's achieved recently in reading and writing has heightened his self-esteem and motivated him to seek greater self-improvement. At one time when he was evicted from his sister's home, Michael relied on the Gargoyle community for food and shelter. With help, he was finally able to move into his own apartment. Now he has a part-time job and writes stories using a computer. Michael learned to ride the CTA bus alone and has been in downtown Chicago several times. Recently, Michael has begun attending church for the first time. He is a thirsty man in a desert who has been given a taste of water and wants more. Paul Strauss, a Spotlight on Service winner, is Michael's tutor.

Alexandra Fleming, Kaskaskia College Reading Link Program, Centralia

Alexandra Fleming was born in Germany and came to the United States 14 years ago when she married a young man in the military. In Germany, she did not graduate from high school. As a volunteer at her son's school, she was told about the Reading Link Program. Since she wanted to be able to read and speak better English, she enrolled. Self-conscious of her language ability and accent, she works very diligently with her tutor and puts in extra study time at home to achieve her goals and to improve her reading skills. Now that she is more confident she is able to help her son with his homework. Alex started the process to take the Citizenship test and passed. She is now a United States citizen! She studied the Rules of the Road book to obtaining a driving permit and then her driver's license. She is looking forward to being able to drive herself and her son to activities this summer. She is no longer dependent upon her husband to drive her everywhere and no longer stranded and isolated at home while he is at work. She will be starting GED classes in the very near future. The goals she is achieving benefit her personally, and also benefit her family.

Wantanee Freeman, YWCA Adult Literacy, Pekin

In Wantanee Freeman's native Thailand, they use a different calendar and different alphabet and numerals. When she came to the United States, she couldn't read the English alphabet or the English numbers. Because of the calendar difference, she didn't know what year she was born. That was only one of many differences. The cold winters in Illinois were a new experience as Thailand has a warm climate. Pekin is a small town compared to the large city in Thailand where she had lived. She was homesick for her family. In spite of being very shy and withdrawn, she was determined to learn and to improve her life. She was matched with a tutor at the YWCA Adult Literacy program. As she learned to speak English, she became more outgoing. Now when she goes shopping she can ask for help in the stores, she can talk with her neighbors and she understands what her son's teacher is saying about his progress. She has studied and passed the driver's test. Her tutor successfully recommended Wantanee for a job. Her boss has the highest praise for her work and has given her several raises. She feels she now has experienced the American dream.

Delfino Garcia, Oakton Community College, Skokie

Delfino Garcia completed four years of schooling in Mexico. At age 16, he came to the United States and worked to support himself and then his family. Delfino works a 3:00 p.m. – 11:00 p.m. shift sometimes working as much as 60 hours a week. This long work schedule did not stop him from registering for classes at Oakton Community College. He studied hard with his tutors to improve his reading, writing and computer skills. With encouragement from his tutors and his new and improved skills, Delfino entered the GED program and is planning to take the test soon. Delfino's effort and improved knowledge did not go unnoticed at work. After 18 years, he was promoted to a new position. He credits his promotion to his tutor, Babette Simon, for teaching him reading, math and the measurement skills he needs to do his new job. Babette was a Spotlight on Service winner last year. Delfino is also better able to help his children with their schoolwork and can communicate with their teachers. He encouraged his daughter to study on-line and get her GED which she recently obtained. Now she is planning to attend college so she can get a better job. Delfino has made outstanding progress in just two years.

Bernice Husher, Kaskaskia College, Centralia

Bernice Husher's reading score has improved as well as her self-confidence. When she first met her tutor, it was hard for Bernice to make eye contact. Now she can meet her tutor as a friend with little or no self-consciousness. Her determination is an inspiration to all who work with her. She has a great desire to succeed. Bernice has faced obstacles. She and her husband both struggle with health issues. The restaurant where she worked for 11 years closed leaving her without a paycheck. But Bernice does not give up working toward her goal of a GED. Bernice also gives back to her community by volunteering at her church, the local food pantry, Girl Scouts and the recycling center. To quote her tutor, Beverly Wheatley (also a Spotlight on Service winner), "Bernice is one of the most responsible people I have worked with."

Jerry Mezo, John A. Logan College, Carterville

In Dec. of 2006 when they closed the Maytag Company plant, Jerry Mezo had worked there for 38 years. All this time, no one knew he could not read. He was quite clever about keeping that a secret. His wife took care of paying the bills and anything else that required reading and writing. When the plant closed, Jerry didn't know what to do. The company sent everyone to an office in Marion to apply for the benefits they would get. They had a stack of forms to complete and that's when Jerry admitted he could not read. At first they did not believe him. When they recommended he go to John A. Logan College to get help, he almost did not go. Now he thinks it was the best thing he ever did in his life. He was matched with a tutor at the Herrin City Library. Jerry told his tutor he wanted to read a book to his granddaughter. This was something he did not get to do with his own children. His tutor took him to the librarian to get help picking out a book to read from children's section. The librarian also helped him get signed up for a library card. With the help of his tutor, he could read that simple book by the end of the next day. The door has opened for Jerry and he is learning to read, do some shopping, write checks, and use the ATM for the first time in his life. He took the constitution test and passed the test on the first try. Now he can vote for the first time. He has come so far in such a short time. His life has changed forever.

Christine Moeller, Illinois Eastern Community Colleges (Frontier), Fairfield

Christine Moeller struggled with reading problems throughout her elementary and high school years. Severe medical problems interfered with Christine's ability to learn and comprehend. After brain surgery, Christine has had to retrain her brain. She studies many hours each night repeating material over and over in order to comprehend and remember it. Living in a rural area, Christine has many miles to drive, often in bad weather, in order to improve her education. In spite of that, her attendance is perfect in her classes and tutoring sessions. With the help of her literacy tutor, she is learning to write sentences and paragraphs. She has begun a paraprofessional program at Frontier Community College. She has learned basic computer skills, has vastly improved her vocabulary and writing skills and is working on spelling skills. Christine is determined and works extremely hard for her achievements.

Roshonda Smith, De La Salle/Tolton Center, Chicago

When Roshonda Smith ran away from home at fourteen, she dropped out of school. She became another statistic of a homeless child. Life on the street was brutal and she endured experiences that left her broken and devastated. When she finally reconnected with her family, she went to live with her grandmother to begin healing. With her grandmother's encouragement, Roshonda enrolled at the Tolton Center. This was a very big move because no one in her family had ever graduated from high school. She began her first year with apprehension. She struggled with lack of trust, lack of self-confidence and lack of motivation. She persisted and now in her second year has blossomed. She is showing a fierce determination to succeed. In fact she worked very hard and passed the GED test on the first try. It was definitely a joyful occasion. She was the keynote speaker for Tolton Center's fall orientation. She is influencing her family as well. She tutors her little sister and her grandmother has expressed an interest in getting her GED. She has applied for an apartment of her own, submitted applications for college and is volunteering as a tutor and office aide at Tolton Center. Roshonda is "Opening her own doors and making positive changes in her life and the lives of others around her." Robert Mathis, a Spotlight on Service winner, is one of Roshonda's tutors.