

2008 SPOTLIGHT ON SERVICE WINNERS

Donald Bartak, Prairie State College, Chicago Heights

Not long after Donald Bartak became semi-retired and had double hip replacements, his wife announced she had enrolled in a Tutor Training class at Prairie State College. After the first class, she glowed with excitement about the class and tutoring and then suggested to Don that he might enjoy this class. She thought he would make a good math tutor. So he went to the next class and she was right. He enjoyed it and has been tutoring ever since. Math has always been easy for Don and he soon became known as "The Amazing Math-A-Don!" He was able to help students pass the GED -- even those who had failed numerous times before. When the GED test changed, Don had to take a different approach to teaching and build the processes carefully. It is gratifying to Don to watch adults who feel beaten by simple math to begin to actually master the "demon" and benefit from this practical knowledge in their daily lives. Teaching students has become his mission.

Robert Brown, Waubensee Community College, Aurora

Robert is unable to be with us today but we still want to honor him by reading his story. Robert volunteers to pay it forward for the many things in his life that he is grateful for. He enjoys helping the students from different cultures and seeing their personalities revealed as they gain confidence in English. Robert not only helps the students with their writing assignments, but with the speeches that they give at their ESL graduation ceremony. He is present at each ceremony congratulating the students, meeting their families and taking pictures with them. It is a proud feeling to see the students he has come to know so well, graduate from the ESL program. Besides his classroom assistance, he offers one-to-one help as needed. While practicing English one day, a student shared his frustration about feeling inadequate with the business vocabulary and etiquette surrounding his present job. Robert wanted to help so he began meeting with the student outside of class one night a week. As the student became more comfortable with the job and with his peers, Robert learned about the student's culture and traditions. It was an experience he will always remember.

John Fendrich, Common Place Family Learning Center and LVA/Project U.P.W.A.R.D., Peoria

Two literacy programs in Peoria nominated John Fendrich. This is the first time that has ever happened. John retired after 45 years of teaching and instead of living a leisurely retirement, he works part-time at the Peoria Journal Star newspaper and is very active in tutoring adults at Common Place and LVA/Project U.P.W.A.R.D. He also teaches computer skills to mentally and physically challenged adults at the Workshop and Training Center and works with a teen group at Common Place. Being a father of six has prepared him to work with the teen age group successfully, too. Some of his adult learners have been an eighty-year-old man who sought help after a lifetime of successful work without the benefit of being able to read; a single, working mother of young children who received a high school diploma despite the fact that she couldn't read; and an ESL student who is a successful professional engineer. John's kindness, patience and concern for each student make him an effective tutor. He doesn't give up easily and the students know this. He is amazed by the courage and dedication of people who have achieved or are trying to achieve productive lives. He is grateful that he has the time, health and opportunity to tutor adult learners.

Ellen Hooker, Regional Office of Education - St. Clair County, Belleville

After retiring as a nurse, Ellen Hooker was looking for volunteer work with young people. She saw an ad in the local newspaper asking for volunteers for the adult literacy program at the Regional Office of Education – St. Clair County. After completing training, she was matched with a 26-year-old man who was a non-reader with severe learning disabilities. To keep this student's interest, Ellen searched for newspaper articles, magazines and books about sports since this is something he showed a great interest in. She used words from the sports pages to teach him sight words. For the first year, she provided learning in the form of a newsletter featuring very short articles on sports. With his increased word list, this student is now able to read the sports pages. They look up batting averages, game scores and history on the Internet. As a result of his interest in the computer, Ellen taught him simple computer skills. He loved it and soon began writing his own articles about sports using the computer. When they first started working together, he told Ellen he did not like to read. He doesn't say that anymore. It has been very rewarding for Ellen to watch this student make such progress in his reading ability.

Robert Mathis, De La Salle Institute/Tolton Adult Education Center, Chicago

Robert Mathis could have chosen the relaxing path of a retired educator. But fortunately for the Tolton Center he did not. His wife, already a reading teacher at Tolton Center, invited Bob to “come and serve.” So he did and the road as a volunteer has made all the difference in the daily life of Bob. He can relate to the students since he experienced many of the same challenges they face in achieving their goals. Three students from the same family knew Bob when they were students at his elementary school. When they dropped out of high school, they knew they had someone who would help them find alternative schooling. Bob has been their guide and confidante every day. He gently eases their anger and frustrations with his kind, but firm words. He listens to them and they trust him with their deepest feelings. These students have progressed to pre-GED and GED classes. As parents, the success they are achieving extends to their children and other family members as well. One student was anxious, rude, argumentative, demanding and undisciplined when he entered the program at Tolton Center. With Bob’s help and guidance, he is now exhibiting better manners, patience, kindness and respect for himself and others. Bob helps to calm another student when she forgets to take her medicine. He is here to calm her and guide her back to a place where she can function more successfully. She would not be able to remain in their program without Bob’s intervention on a regular basis. Bob is referred to by a colleague at Tolton Center as the “Rock of Tolton” because of his strength and leadership ability. Bob is simply an awesome volunteer tutor with a great sense of humor. He inspires students and staff every day bringing hope for a better future.

Carol Randall, YWCA Adult Literacy, Pekin

Carol Randall worked for the IL Department of Human Services/Public Aid for 38 years. In working with individuals or families, she saw on many occasions adults struggle to fill out applications or to even navigate their automated phone systems. Some of these people had no opportunity for formal education when they were young and they were often embarrassed to ask for help. Over her 20 years as a volunteer at the YWCA in Pekin, Carol has been able to make many people aware of literacy programs. For the past several years, she has worked with two developmentally disabled young women from a local group home. This has been an extremely rewarding experience as they improve their reading skills. These two women work very hard and are very proud of their accomplishments. Every week they meet at the Pekin Public Library. At the end of each class, they pick out books, videos and CD’s to take home for the upcoming week. Carol volunteers as a literacy tutor because programs like the one at the YWCA makes a difference in people’s lives.

Ruth Richert, Spoon River College Literacy Project, Macomb

Thirteen years ago Ruth Richert took training to be a literacy tutor at Spoon River College on the Macomb campus. With a background as a teacher with degrees in Spanish, English, and bilingual-education, her first students were Spanish speakers who wanted to learn English. She has also worked with students on reading, speaking or studying for the GED. After retiring from teaching, she became a regular volunteer in three-hour ESL classes that meet twice a week. Students from many countries come to these classes. She not only helps her students improve their academic skills but also works on improving their self-esteem. Ruth quickly puts her students at ease with her quiet and gentle way. The fear and nervousness they feel disappears by the end of the first tutoring session spent with Ruth. Ruth is very generous with her time, talents, patience and compassion for her students. She will stay after class to help students or meet with students outside of class. She started with one student and now divides her time between eight. When asked if this is too many, she quickly responds with "We'll be fine."

Diana Schueler, YWCA Adult Literacy, Pekin

Diana Schueler, another volunteer tutor that won from YWCA Adult Literacy, retired as a classroom room teacher after 35 years. However, she did not stay retired for long. After seeing a flyer about the YWCA Adult Literacy program at a retired teachers' association meeting, she became a certified ESL tutor. A week later, she met with her first adult learner. This man spoke very limited English but wanted to become an American citizen. He is learning to speak, understand, read and write English. They use the computer every week which allows him to translate English to Italian. His understanding of English is mushrooming. Diane also helped put together a side-by-side English-Italian missal for him to use when he attends Mass. He has been having trouble following the Mass in English. This 76-year old man is committed to succeeding. Another student had no experience with food preparation so the American supermarket was a learning experience. "Field trips" to the grocery store helped this young woman. Diane also helped this student find an ESL program after she moved out-of-state. They still correspond through e-mail. Even though Diane loved being a classroom teacher, she tells everyone, "Being a volunteer tutor in this program is the best teaching job I ever had!"

Paul Strauss, Blue Gargoyle Community Services, Chicago

As we mentioned before, Paul Strauss is Michael Dellar's tutor. Paul is unable to be here today so Tom Barbee with the Blue Gargoyle program will accept his award. Michael and Paul are learning from each other and have developed a respect for each other. Paul is devoted to Michael and encourages his optimism in the face of his adversities. When Michael had to move out of his sister's apartment, Paul helped him move to a new apartment. Paul's confidence and steadfast support of Michael is instrumental in the rapid progress Michael is making. Paul wrote an essay about Michael. After reading it to him, Michael was inspired to write his own autobiographical essay as well as other stories on the computer. Since then, his spelling and comprehension has increased dramatically. There is no doubt that someday Michael will be able to get a high school GED. Michael has also made big changes in his personal life by becoming more independent and has a part-time paying job for the first time in his life. Paul says, "How often do we see that we have helped to make a concrete, positive, real change in someone else's life? That is why I tutor."

Beverly Wheatley, Kaskaskia College, Centralia

As we mentioned before, Beverly Wheatley is Bernice Husher's tutor. In the 15 years Beverly has been a tutor, she has also been her students' mentor, confidante and counselor. She is a wonderful inspiration for those she serves as well as the staff she works with. Her enthusiasm for "The Reading Link" at Kaskaskia College is so contagious that her husband has become a tutor, too. In spite of personal sadness and tragedies, she found inner strength to continue serving others with energy and commitment. Beverly connects with the learners in a personal way by encouraging them to strive for their best and continue even though the journey to success seems long and hard. She volunteers to give back and wants to help those who are trying to improve their education. She feels that anything she can do to help is a wonderful opportunity. She exemplifies what a volunteer is all about.