

massachusetts reads and succeeds!

A monthly series dedicated to the people and the organizations whose efforts in literacy make Massachusetts a great place to live and learn.



They are called Champions, a splashy word that evokes images of cheering crowds and ribbon-hung medals. But the recognition of the ten 2006-2007 Literacy Champions of the state of Massachusetts will be a quieter affair – a ceremony that you, the reader, will engage in, in the coming weeks by reading their stories. Here, you will learn of how individuals strengthen our society, by providing a basic human right: the power of self-expression. But more, you will learn that the source of their boldness, innovation, and dedication is compassion and that this is the true mark of a Champion.

- Author and 2006 Literacy Champion, Peggy Rambach

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The empty shelves in Char Caver's new Adult Education Classroom indicate that Project Hope's move from Dorchester to Roxbury is still in-progress. Otherwise, the room is cheerful and bright and carpeted in forest green. One wall is white, two butter-yellow, and the fourth a picture window.

The backs of brand new lime-green chairs touch the outer edges of four clean and narrow faux-wood Formica tables that face each other in the shape of rectangle. Yet still, Caver considers the room to be a little "stark," and has already sought to warm things up with bulbs. Spring bulbs, ten or twelve containers-full, Paperwhites and one proud Amaryllis, in full, red, and trumpet-shaped bloom.

"A beautiful environment inspires beauty in us," Caver says, quoting Oprah Winfrey, who exhibits the kind of perseverance and integrity that Caver admires. And the message of this deceptively simple statement is at the core of what Char Caver calls her holistic approach to teaching. "Mind, body, spirit and emotions," she says. "I believe in that philosophy and teach in that place."

Her students are women between the ages of thirty and sixty who Caver says "have internalized all kinds of messages of who they are and what they can be in this world." They are women who have been victims of violence and trauma, "trauma from being a woman of color, trauma from poverty. There are all forms of violence," Char says, with an authority that comes from being a woman of color herself, and from having participated in a study called the Women, Violence, and Adult Education Project that left on her a deep impression.

Previous to her work in Adult Education, Caver was an elementary school teacher, part of corporate America, and she earned a Masters of Divinity from Boston University School of Theology. She sees her career path as having prepared her for what she is doing now.

Like planting bulbs. Or more accurately, asking her students to plant them and water them, and replant them if necessary, not only to ornament a classroom, but to illustrate the concept of self-love. "The bulb is their potential," Caver says, "Right now, they can't see their potential. But like Nature, we plant it, we nurture it, and we let the miracle happen."



However, Caver doesn't stop there. She asks her students to identify the miracles by naming what they'd like to grow inside themselves. So Caver's students typed words like "brain" onto strips of white paper, taped them to smooth, black, aquarium stones, and placed the stones beside their bulbs. "Everything in the universe is about symbolism," Caver says. "Nature has a lot to teach us."

And still the lesson continues because Caver connects all of her projects to the more traditional academic curriculum of Mathematics, Health, and Language Arts. In this case, Caver asks her students to read and discuss the poem, "Student's Creed," and to circle the words

in it that resonate for them, like proactive, that the students sought to define with a dictionary.

Then, to complete the project, Caver will take what she recently learned, with the investment of her Massachusetts Literacy Foundation grant, and the media-art of Digital Storytelling. Her students have been taking their bulbs in every stage

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exclaims, "from a three dollar and ninety-nine cent kit!" - the price of each students' set of bulbs.

But she knows that all projects can't always work so well. And yet the ones that don't are opportunities for new and unexpected "learning moments" as Caver calls them. If she decides to switch one activity that's not working for another that she hopes will, she is, in effect, showing her students that she's just as human as they are and demonstrating, as well, the concept of choice: that when one path appears to have led nowhere, there is always an alternative, always another way. "We're all learning together," says Caver. "It's all about human connection."

No doubt this will be the genesis for Caver's next project. She just saw some stones at the Christmas Tree Shop, and they were shaped like hearts.

Is someone you know a literacy champion? Information & application for 2008 Awards is available online at www.massliteracy.org

Visit www.massliteracy.com for additional information on the Literacy Champions.