

Literacy *Massachusetts* **CHAMPIONS**

2003 – 2008

Celebrating Excellence in the Field of Literacy





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Partners in Literacy

The Literacy Champions program is a main initiative of Herald Media's Massachusetts Literacy Foundation. The main partner in this program is Verizon, who, through the Check Into Literacy Program, invites customers to donate \$1 on their monthly bills in support of literacy. In Massachusetts, those funds support the MLF and specifically the Literacy Champions Awards.

Verizon understands first-hand how technology is transforming how we live, learn and work. To participate in today's knowledge economy, people need a level of literacy and education that is unprecedented in history. That's why the Verizon Foundation, the philanthropic arm of Verizon Communications, focuses its giving on a broad range of programs that improve literacy and education.

The Massachusetts Literacy Champions Awards program is an example of how everyone profits when businesses work together in partnership to give back to the community. Herald Media and Verizon are proud to take a leading role in helping Massachusetts accomplish its' goal of a fully literate society.



Introduction

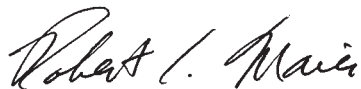
We live and work in a media-rich environment of newspapers, radio, television, the Internet, and video games that dominate our lives. Yet, the most basic skill anyone must have to succeed in this media-rich world is the ability to read. Literacy is the primary building block on which an individual's success in life is built. The ability to use language whether on the printed page or on a computer screen or in speech determines how well we communicate with each other and with the world. Through language we form the connections—the bonds—that build the community that is the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

The Literacy Champions whose work is highlighted and honored in this publication represent thousands of individuals who work and volunteer in communities all across our state. Many of our literacy programs are hosted by public libraries where there is nothing more basic to the library's effort to strengthen communities than providing formal and informal opportunities to gain literacy. From the Hispanic grandfather in Springfield who learned to read English so that he could enjoy reading to his grandchildren to the Chinese immigrant in Plymouth who learned English, became a citizen and started a business with the help of library literacy programs, public libraries help residents succeed while strengthening our Commonwealth.

Today's library is about much more than books. The library brings you the world of information resources you need to succeed in education, in lifelong learning, to find a job, to start or grow a business, and to connect with others in your community. The library is the great equalizer in every community offering access to books, computers, music, DVDs, audio books, and electronic resources available 24 x 7.

Please join me and our partners in the Massachusetts Literacy Foundation in celebrating the contributions this year's Literacy Champions make by helping residents gain the literacy skills they need to connect to their communities and be successful members of our Commonwealth.

Sincerely,



Robert C. Maier
Director
Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners

Visit Mass.Gov/Libraries to learn more about the many resources at your library.

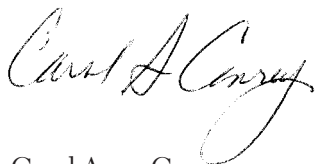
Welcome

This year, 2008, celebrates the fifth year anniversary of the Massachusetts Literacy Champions Awards program and during these past five years I've been privileged to take part in recognizing 45 remarkable educators, to share in their knowledge and creativity, and their unflappable enthusiasm. With individuals like these working in the trenches, Massachusetts cannot help but make great strides forward in the development of a fully literate population.

The goal of this publication is to showcase the important work being done by the Literacy Champions: to tell their stories, to communicate what makes them tick – what makes them true champions of literacy. Our authors, Peggy Rambach, herself a 2006 Literacy Champion, and Lauren Leikin, have spent the past months interviewing the 2006 and 2007 Champions and they've more than met the challenge. To quote Peggy, "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 their compassion and that this is the true mark of a Champion."

I invite you to meet the Massachusetts Literacy Champions and to share in their accomplishments.

Sincerely,



Carol Anne Conroy
President
Massachusetts Literacy Foundation



There is an opportunity for each of us to advance literacy by supporting the efforts of the Literacy Champions and the countless other Massachusetts educators who they also represent. We can recognize that much work still needs to be done, we can stay informed, and we can challenge our local and state leaders to do the same. I encourage you to share this publication with friends, colleagues and leaders in every community of the Commonwealth. Print copies are available or download an electronic edition at www.massliteracy.org.

5 Years of Literacy Champions



2003-2004 Literacy Champions



2005 Literacy Champions



2006 Literacy Champions



2007 Literacy Champions



2008 Literacy Champions

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A Legacy of Literacy

A legacy of literacy, indeed; and yet the truth is that these three extraordinary charter member Literacy Champions are too busy working in the present to worry about how they'll be remembered in the future. As one of them says, "My goal is to actually eliminate my job – to get to the point where the teachers are so great and the students are so great that I'm simply not needed anymore!" Yet it is hard to imagine a time when these dedicated individuals won't be needed – or wanted – so while we're looking at the legacy they've left so far, let's consider ourselves blessed that there's still so much more from them to come.

2003 LITERACY CHAMPION – BARBARA LINDSAY



In 2003, Barbara Lindsay was honored as a Literacy Champion primarily for her outstanding work as a Literacy Specialist for elementary school students; but five years later, it is the work she is doing with her students' teachers that is getting the most attention. "It is so exciting for me," she says, "because the more effective that I can be with the classroom teacher, the better it is for all students. I can work with individual students, but if I work with the classroom teachers too, and they can develop their own craft, then it's not only for this year's class, but also for the classes in the future, down the road."

Lindsay's own road to this point has evolved from a series of small steps to huge leaps. Her professional development focus began in 2002, when she and a group of other teachers began a "study group," meeting after school, in their free time, to talk about classroom reading strategies. The summer after Lindsay received the Literacy Champion award and the accompanying support from Verizon, she and the other teachers went to a weeklong Reading and Writing Institute at Columbia Teachers' College. "That has led," she says, "to so much inspiration." Lindsay and her colleagues have since taught multiple 30-hour professional development courses after school on topics ranging from revision strategies to non-fiction writing. To date, over 100 teachers have participated, many from the Westwood Public Schools where Lindsay works, but also from the surrounding towns of Stoughton, Norwood, Medfield, and Holliston.

Even better, however, than the growth in the number of participants is the growth in the number of leaders. "Each year," says Lindsay, "we've grown more and more in terms of having teachers step up as leaders, and that has meant so much to me." She pauses, a champion of literacy, and so much more. "It's a great feeling to be able to reach out and help others."

2004 LITERACY CHAMPION – SHERRY COMERCHERO



Sherry Comerchero already had a job. A great job: she's a Speech-Language Pathologist for the Haverhill Public Schools. But that didn't stop her in January 2004 from founding an all-volunteer tutoring program to work with elementary students reading below grade level – and it isn't stopping her now, either. In fact, it doesn't seem like much is going to stop the volunteers from the Merrimack Valley Jewish Coalition; as Comerchero says, "the program has pretty much taken on a life of its own."

Of course, it's had some help along the way – not least from the volunteers themselves, many of whom return every year to work one-on-one with a student, often bringing new friends along with them. "Word of mouth is our most powerful tool for growth," says Comerchero. Then too, there's the formal recognition, which came first from the Massachusetts Literacy Foundation and Verizon. "That really opened the door for me," says Comerchero. "We didn't have any money before that. Everything was volunteer-driven and done completely on a shoestring."

Marilyn Antonucci

Linking Literacies: Parents and Children Exploring Literacy Together

With its high ceilings, paneled wooden doors, and porcelain water fountains, it's not hard to imagine how the Zanetti Montessori School looked when it first opened as the Howard Street School 100 years ago. So you have to figure it looked the same when Marilyn Antonucci showed up there in 1973 to teach her first Kindergarten class. Now, as Springfield Public School System's Instructional Leader Specialist she's back again, assigned as recently as February, 2007, to mentor teachers and help raise the MCAS scores in English Language Arts. "I've come full circle," she says.

But that circle is definitely not closed.

On this rainy April day, while a third grade teacher observes, Antonucci models a circle of another kind, what's called a Literature Circle, proven to be an effective means of guided reading and a classic method of collaborative learning. And when it comes to collaboration, who could demonstrate it better than Marilyn Antonucci ?

To Antonucci, reading is not a solitary pursuit, especially when many who are learning how, are the urban poor. "You have to understand," she says, "that

“ The value is the communication piece,” says Antonucci. “Once everyone is trusting and communicating in the family – school, parents and children – it brings people together into a comfortable place where there is no right or wrong way to teach someone how to read or write. ”

there are interruptions in their lives that are different from the usual,” – like living in a shelter or undertaking the kind of responsibility that comes with having parents who do not speak English. And so teachers



After more than twenty years in the Springfield Public School system, **Marilyn Antonucci** recently became the Elementary School Coordinator for the South Hadley Public Schools where she provides professional development for teachers in all areas of literacy development and, most importantly, she develops reading partnerships between students, parents and the community.

and school administrators best serve these children by communicating and connecting with the children's families, and in turn by helping the families connect to the social service and literacy organizations that serve their community.

Antonucci wrote her dissertation on family literacy in 2005 and her efforts in the field raise test scores, but more importantly they establish in an otherwise disenfranchised demographic, literacy's far-reaching benefits: the value and pursuit of education, a respect for culture and diversity, and individual pride in personal legacy.

To accomplish this, says Antonucci, "You have to get the right chemistry. You have to have a group of the right, committed agencies." Which is exactly what

Antonucci had to successfully design and implement at the Herman Gerena School - her most recent series of programs that improved the lives of more than 750 children and their families from Springfield's

Diana Barbero

Children’s Book Club for Fathers

Diana Barbero will call you Sweetheart or Honey, no matter if you’ve known her for five minutes or five years. This goes for her students too, who would seem to be unlikely recipients for such endearments, some weighing 200 pounds, capable of bench-pressing more, and incarcerated at the Suffolk County House of Correction. But, as Barbero says, “I don’t care to know why they’re here. I’m interested in each one as a person.” And so they’re all Honey to her.

Some, as young as nineteen, are already fathers of one and even two children. So, Barbero’s job, along with GED preparation is to teach them parenting. Not an easy task since many were not parented, Barbero says flatly. And if they were, they were by a mother only, when most, Barbero says, “would do better to have a father as role model.” Nevertheless, a good father is what she must teach them to be. And what helps her to do it best is literature. Children’s literature.

“I begin with *The Giving Tree* (by Shel Silverstein),” the story of how a tree gives all of itself to benefit a little boy. “I ask them, who do you think the tree represents?” The classic *Good Night Moon* (by Margaret Wise), is also a staple in Barbero’s class. “It’s one that the (men’s) children know and should have. The simplicity of it. The



Diana Barbero is a literacy teacher at the Suffolk County House of Correction where she helps adult incarcerated males improve upon their reading levels and their parenting skills.

primary colors.” And so it’s clear that Barbero introduces children’s literature to her students to give them a concrete, accessible, and positive way to do what parents must: “Feed their children,” she says, “intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally.”

But the books feed her students too. “It’s something they haven’t had,” says Barbero – the nurturing, the sense of safety, the gentle messages that come with the experience of being read to. And so, Barbero says, “I read to them constantly. They love *Curious George!*” she says, obviously gratified by her students’ pleasure. And when she reads them *Daddy Daddy, Be There Daddy, Be There Through All My Life*, she says, “I look at their faces and I want to cry...” again, using a children’s book to give her students permission to recognize and grieve for the absence of their own fathers, their own absence in their children’s lives, while simultaneously communicating “a message,” Barbero says, to nevertheless, “be there for their child.”

That they are presently behind bars might present an obstacle to this or certainly cause some significant delay, but Barbero overcame it ten years ago, by proposing to the Suffolk County Sheriff’s office, *Fathers’ Read Aloud*, a prison program she heard about on National Public Radio and knew immediately was something she had to have.

The program makes it possible for the inmates’ children to hear their father’s recorded voices reading them a children’s book – simple as that; and yet, as one of Barbero’s students wrote to her, “I wouldn’t have the money in the world to pay for it. That’s how much it means to me.” Formally, the program is intended to

Margaret Boyko

Weaving A Strong Civic, Cultural and Economic Fabric

At the top floor of the Palmer Public Library, the elevator doors open to what looks like a plush corporate headquarters. The carpet is charcoal grey, the walls a sophisticated sage-green, and beyond an archway, a woman sits at a large, sleek desk. But the archway's gold lettered sign indicates that this is a center, not for commerce, but literacy. And yet, CEO, Margaret Boyko says plainly, that Top Floor Learning is exactly what it looks like: a business.

An atypical one for sure, in that it is a not-for-profit, 501c3 and serves primarily the poor and underserved. But unlike most state literacy programs its only affiliation is with a public library. "We chose to part company with the DOE (Department of Education) and other organizations," says Boyko. "We became



As Executive Director of ESL at Top Floor Learning Inc. in Palmer, **Margaret Boyko** oversees the business of teaching adults the skills they need to become successful as individuals and members of the community.

“ I sit in their offices. I do PowerPoint presentations. We have open houses. I do whatever it takes,” she says, in order to tell them, “We’re making people more employable, better skilled, and financially independent. We’re helping indirectly to alleviate poverty, dependence on welfare. So if you’re a local business you’re going to benefit.”

totally community supported. No more restrictions. We decided to change our structure.” And who best to have ensured the success of this bold make-over, but someone with Margaret Boyko’s business acumen?

“I feel comfortable running a business,” she says, having already done so in her hometown of Edinburgh, Scotland before moving to the U.S. in 1996. She was

also comfortable teaching, having earned a CTEFLA (Certificate for Teaching English as a Foreign Language to Adults). So it’s not surprising that just six months after signing up in 1996 as a volunteer, she became Top Floor Learning’s Director, then an Executive Director and then, by 2005, she became the CEO.

Still, how can an educational organization that depends “totally on the community to keep it alive,” as Boyko says, be considered a business?

Because literacy is profitable.

And who best to pitch that message to foundations and corporate sponsors, but Boyko. “I sit in their offices. I do PowerPoint presentations. We have open houses. I do whatever it takes,” she says, in order to tell them, “We’re making people more employable, better skilled, and financially independent. We’re helping indirectly to alleviate poverty, dependence on welfare. So if you’re a

local business you’re going to benefit.”

Or you might say, profit. And the benefactors’ brass name plates mounted on wooden plaques at Top Floor Learning’s doors, guarantee the profit to the individual: the Lifelong Learners who can have their pick of 105 courses in what is a self-sustaining program, the high school drop-out who can receive a one to one

Char Caver

Digital Storytelling

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 succinct and 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 a three year study called the Women,



A teacher at Project Hope in Dorchester, **Char Caver** has become a respected leader in basic adult education through her work with women and self esteem .

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 to be a pastoral counselor. She sees her career path as having serendipitously 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. Because self-love, or the recognition and nurturance of ones inner beauty is, again, what Caver believes will ensure her students’ ability to rise out of poverty and hopelessness, move beyond the safety of her classroom and spread their worth to society.

“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



Donna Cycz

Rediscovering the Joy of Reading: Parent, Child and School

Not much fazes Donna Cycz. After all, she traveled, with a Yale University program to the outer reaches of Mongolia and grew up on a North Hadley farm where, “picking five tons of cucumbers a day was nothing.” But moving thirty-one years of teaching materials from The Greenfield Elementary school to her new Newton School classroom in Greenfield, Massachusetts, has got her a little rattled. “I must have two, three, five hundred boxes,” she says, along with larger things like her Smart Board.

Cycz first saw the Smart Board at a conference, a white board that doubles as a touch screen computer. And the best part? No erasing at the lesson’s end. Cycz can just print it out and hand the copies to her students for review. “It’s a chalkboard of the future!” Cycz exclaims. But no way was Cycz going to wait for the future to get it. Instead, she wrote a grant.

It’s a common refrain around Cycz: grant writing – the way, since 1999 that she’s implemented the ideas



Donna Cycz is a veteran classroom teacher who, for more than thirty years, has used her knowledge to bring exciting and innovative learning opportunities to the students and parents of Greenfield Public Schools.

saying only that her husband is “a very understanding man,” Cycz has never felt constrained by state budgets, or curriculum guidelines to do the job she loves the best way that she can. In fact, she says, “I have everything, I feel, at my fingertips.”

The Internet, for one thing, where, along with the “weird articles” and “tidbits” at the backs of books, she finds the grants. Like the Lysol Grant that paid for the germ solution that showed her students in a black light, exactly what grew “under their armpits and between their toes.” And Toshiba’s Road Kill Grant. “That was a hoot,” Cycz says, laughing. “Road kill!” But she applied for it in relation, again, to a mathematics framework, and that won her the \$2,000 that helped her to teach her students to record the whereabouts and

species of every dead animal they drove past. Then they read and graphed the coordinates on a giant classroom map and discussed in Fourth Grade terms, the impact of Land Use and Development on the habitat and population of regional wildlife. All examples of what Cycz calls “Back Door Learning,” when learning is so hand’s on and fun, students are not aware that they’re learning at all.

So, \$6,000 for a Smart Board, \$1,000 for digital

“ Not only would kids talk to other kids, but they would talk to different parents or parents would talk to parents. They would learn to communicate, converse or sit back and listen. ”

that come to her, she says, while she brushes her teeth. And as long as she meets the Massachusetts’ State Frameworks, and her students continue to make high scores on the MCAS, no administrator has a reason to object. “I know the curriculum you have to teach,” says Cycz. “You have to keep that as your bread and butter. You have to have your five food groups. How can you rearrange that, so kids want to eat it?” So, dismissive of the time it surely takes her to find, write and send the grants,

Silja Kallenbach

Online Mini-course on Multiple Intelligences in Adult Education

“I was in the right place at the right time with the right idea,” says Silja Kallenbach, Coordinator of the New England Literacy Resource Center at Boston’s World Education, speaking of her program in Multiple Intelligence that brought Howard Gardner’s celebrated theory to the practice of Adult Education. But the fortunate convergence of time, place and a good idea, occurs so often in Kallenbach’s career that it couldn’t just be Fate.

Take her first Adult Education job back in 1980, when just out of college, Kallenbach joined a small group of volunteers in Dorchester to tutor Latina women in English and, as she says, got “hooked,” changing her career aspirations right then and there from International Relations to Adult Education. Then, federal budget cuts doomed the fledgling center’s host organization – or would have, if Kallenbach had not stepped up. She recalls thinking, “Either we make something of it, or throw in the towel.” So she transformed herself from tutor to grant writer/administrator and helped turn the organization into a 501C3 that became the *Mujeres Unidas en Accion* or United Women in Action, that is still operating today. It also didn’t hurt, that Kallenbach, born in Finland and originally in the U.S. to attend college, had rapidly learned to speak Spanish.

Next, the City of Boston offered her a job as Director of Adult Literacy and Refugee Services, another timely step in the steady ascent of a career in a field that has been marginalized and faced a steady decline in funding, even though, according to Kallenbach there are “thousands of people on waiting lists at any given time to enter these programs.”

It must have helped that Kallenbach knew her strengths early on. “I’m a good facilitator of processes. A collaborative planner. A decent trainer. A supporter and supervisor of staff. I’m a good listener. I try to keep my ear to the ground of what are the needs in the field. I’m good at helping develop feasible projects out of fledgling ideas.” And at the New England Resource Center she calls on all of them to implement programs that “bring



Since 1994 **Silja Kallenbach** has served as Director of the New England Literacy Resource Center at World Education in Boston where she develops and provides professional development in the field of adult education.

added value to the adult learning community.”

Programs like the six-year Adult Multiple Intelligence study that began when Kallenbach asked, “How can Multiple Intelligences theory be applied to Adult Education?” To find the answer, she assembled a planning committee that hand-picked ten teacher-applicants as research partners and worked in collaboration with the Harvard Graduate School of Education’s National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy. The results were tangible: the publication by Teachers College Press of *Multiple Intelligences and Adult Literacy: A Sourcebook for Practitioners* and an online AMI professional development course offered to instructors of adults in New England and beyond.

Another project spearheaded by Kallenbach, the New England ABE-to-College Transition Project, also jumped New England borders to become the National College Transition Network. “We determined that people (ABE learners) needed additional skills to succeed in college.” They don’t know how to navigate the system or write a term paper. They don’t know that absences count against them because Adult Education, as a rule, is nurturing and forgiving. They get caught up in taking endless developmental study courses where they use up their Pell Grants and are then unable to earn a degree.” For too many adult learners, the GED was “the end of the journey, the end of their education.” “We needed to both raise GED learner’s aspirations and prepare them to pursue those aspirations.”

So Kallenbach literally picked up the phone

Judy Langley

Orientation Power Point CDs for New Students and Preparation for Citizenship

She doesn't wear a pocket protector. And it's hard to imagine her dressed in the Beatnik black of the Geniuses behind the Bar at the Apple Store. Except that Judy Langley could out-genius the best of them.

For one thing, she can "speak both English and technology," she says, a rare gift when it comes to the computer gifted, one that served her well in her past corporate career in Canada and now, in her present one as the Technology Coordinator of the Literacy Learning Center at the Plymouth Public Library.

There, she assists ABE instructors, ESOL tutors, and all of their students with computers. *Assists*, but does not teach, Langley would say. In fact when Judy Langley hears the uninitiated educator or politician proclaim that "teaching computer," is crucial to the field of literacy, she says she has to bite her tongue. "We don't teach computers here," she says, "We use them as a tool to facilitate learning."

So, when students have a file to save, that's when Langley teaches them how to open a folder. Or if they need to write, that's when she'll show them how to bring up a document. Her view being, if you don't have a *reason* to use a computer, what's the point of learning how? As in: if you don't have to build a house, why learn to wield a hammer? Still, after Langley makes sure her students have first focused on the content of their writing, then she is happy to show them "how to make it look really cool."

So, no doubt, she appreciates the "cool" factor. But unlike the geek majority, she is able to imagine what it's like to be someone who doesn't – someone who might actually scream at the sight of a "mouse." Someone, you might say, who is a (gasp!) Technophobe.

And now that the Department of Education's (DOE)



Judy Langley is the Technology Coordinator for the Literacy Technology Learning Center located at the Plymouth Public Library where she uses her degrees in applied mathematics and chemical engineering to

successfully integrate technology with adult education.

assessment for Adult Basic Learners and Non-Native speakers is exclusively computerized, Langley's got her work cut out for her. But unfazed, she says she "saves a few dead mice for students who are intimidated or afraid," and describes how to use them by comparing the motion to the pivot of a driver's foot from brake to gas. But guaranteed to assuage the worst of their fears,

“ “ We don't teach computers here,” she says,
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Langley teaches them how to open a folder.
Or if they need to write, that's when she'll show
them how to bring up a document. ” ”

are the programs that Langley herself creates for them. Simple tools Langley would say, to support a teacher's unit or help a student study. But a well-honed tool can be a thing of art, designed to make the most challenging

Christine Polk

Partnering in the Workplace

Like the mountains themselves, sometimes bucolic other times treacherous, the Berkshire Region of Massachusetts is full of paradox. A major destination for tourists who seek its natural beauty, arts, culture and history, it also faces high dropout and low literacy rates and the other social, educational and economic hurdles of rural and isolated communities. All the better then, that Christine Polk moved there nine years ago when she was looking to change the course of her career, because paradox is what she thrives on.

Discouraged after twenty years by the increased constraints placed on elementary school education, it only took tutoring a couple from Russia for Polk to know what she wanted to do next. “Absolutely fascinating!” she says, recalling the experience, “How people learn a language, learning about other people and cultures first-hand and how our language is so crazy—” And so she added two ESOL certificates to her two Masters in Education degrees and in 2001 began working for the South Berkshire Education Collaborative where she is Staff Coordinator, Program Coordinator, Curriculum Coordinator and Americans With Disabilities Act Coordinator. But what she likes best is coordinating



Christine Polk is the Workplace/Volunteer Coordinator for the South Berkshire Educational Collaborative where she successfully manages onsite ESOL classes for service businesses and their employees.

the unlikely union of local business and language instruction; what is called Workplace Education.

It began in the South Berkshire Region as a solution to a growing customer service problem encountered by businesses in the thriving hospitality industry. Their mainly South and Central American housekeepers, maintenance workers and food service workers could not provide guests an extra towel or directions to the pool because they did not know enough English to understand these common requests. So their employers, beginning five years ago with the historic Red Lion Inn, asked the Collaborative to devise a way for their workers to learn only the English that they’d need for their job.

“There was nothing, absolutely nothing for the beginner learners in housekeeping,” says Polk. “They needed to communicate. To talk. They didn’t need to fill in the blanks. So I decided to develop something.” That something was the ESOL Housekeeping Curriculum Resource for Job Specified English that is available in all SABES regional libraries. Next came Active Learning: Training Guide to Housekeeping ESOL, a compilation of strategies for workplace teaching that is also available from SABES. “Then came the partnering idea,” Polk says, “This was when we developed a very, very specific idea where all the practice and reinforcement was done on the job.”

Like most innovation, Polk’s significant contributions to the field of Workplace Education came from necessity. The businesses matched grant funds or provided full funding for a program, and they gave their workers half or fully paid release-time for instruction. But they



Peggy Rambach

Arts and Healing: Memoir Writing for the Chronically Ill

I decided to be a writer when my chemistry professor told me to drop his course before I flunked it the very same week that the poet, Denise Levertov, told me she liked my poems. So, I graduated in 1980 with a BA in English and did what most writers do who want to teach for a living; got a terminal degree, began to publish stories and articles, and won grants and fellowships while I taught year after year as a college adjunct instructor. Then, finally, in 2001, I published a novel.

I had no illusions that it would be an Oprah Pick or that it would even stay in print longer than a year or two. All I thought was, Yea! Now I could finally get a real teaching job, full-time, with health care, a retirement plan, maybe even an office, free parking and an actual salary that would liberate me from my dependence on family.

Well, maybe at a college in North Dakota or Nevada or some other remote region of the United States, but not in Boston. So after some anguish, I took the philosophical view that my apparent failure was a message. And it said that maybe I should do what I wanted to do, even if it meant foregoing the possibility of making what any self-respecting adult would call a living.

I wanted to be a Resident Writer in Healing Arts.

Somewhere along the way, the New England Foundation for the Humanities had asked me to teach a course designed to encourage the patrons of a senior center to tell their own life stories. And when they did, I saw how it validated who they were, restored their self-worth, and connected them to their community. And I determined that everyone our society isolates and stigmatizes should not be denied the chance to contrib-



Author and educator, **Peggy Rambach** is a resident teacher/artist for The Healing Arts Initiative in collaboration with the Vermont Arts Exchange, the Massachusetts Cultural Council and the New Hampshire State Council on the Arts. She teaches writing to elders, long-time care patients, family and professional caregivers, recovering substance abusers and prison inmates.

ute to it through the arts – in my case, writing.

But after two years of enduring the quizzical looks of elder-care activities directors with budgets that barely covered refreshments for Friday night Bingo, I had to concede defeat and return again to kicking at all those closed doors to academia, until they defeated me too. Which was when a new one opened that led to my

“ I wanted to be a Resident Writer in Healing Arts... And I determined that everyone our society isolates and stigmatizes should not be denied the chance to contribute to it through the arts – in my case, writing. ”

collaboration with the Asian Center of Merrimack Valley Inc. and produced the book *Seeds of Lotus: Cambodian and Vietnamese Voices in America*. Then, in 2005 the Massachusetts Cultural Council and the Vermont Arts Exchange knocked at my door and invited me to be a lead artist in their Healing Arts Initiative.

Sonia Walmsley

Computer Literacy: Online Opportunites and Concepts of Financial Literacy

When Sonia Walmsley left Columbia in 1999 at the age of thirty-two for Attleboro, Massachusetts, she wasn't looking for a better life. She had a college degree, was the principal of a bi-lingual private school in Cali, and thought she and her boyfriend would probably get married. Her stay here would be temporary, solely for the purpose of learning English for her job.

But then her destiny changed. Her relationship in Columbia ended and soon after, she fell for and eventually married an American who didn't know a word of Spanish. Suddenly she found herself learning English, not for work but "for love," she says simply. Though, lest anyone hear violins, she quickly adds, "or else I wouldn't be here. It was too much suffering."

Having come from a country where only the very rich own microwaves, she found herself overwhelmed by a "combination of language and technology." She was too fearful to turn on a stove. "I thought it would blow-up!" She didn't know what a thermostat was. And she says, "I didn't know how to eat anything. The refrigerator was bare. Just eggs; and I didn't know how to cook an egg." She wandered lost for hours. And when she turned to others for directions or help, she received little of either. "People think you don't know anything. People don't even try to listen," she says.

Even when she went to the Literacy Center in Attleboro to seek guidance from the Educational Counselor, she felt that she was met with rudeness, and impatience. Now, ironically, she holds the same position at a homey mustard-yellow Victorian that sits beside the library right in the center of town, and she has vowed to provide her clients better service.

Something she says she does with a combination of humor and an insistence on personal responsibility. She



A former school principal and native of Columbia, **Sonia Walmsley** serves as a role model to the students at five Attleboro based ESOL programs where she shares her time. She can currently be found at the Brennan Middle School, the Attleboro Literacy Center and the Attleboro Public Schools Continuing Education Program.

gives them phone numbers, volunteer and paying job information, books, practice tests, and names of bilingual doctors and information for free services in every sector. And she shows her clients, all non-native speakers, "how the doors keep opening for them. In the U.S. you get flexible schedules, tutors, volunteers. If your goal is to get your GED, you can take it in Spanish. I give them the information in their hands."

But finally, it is their responsibility to use it. And so

“ I say, 'Bring books wherever you are: at the job, in the subway. When you're working, ask your colleagues, 'What is that word? Then go back and ask them, how do you pronounce it? Every day you learn something new' ”

along with practical information, Walmsley provides them with what they need just as much: encouragement, confidence, "the sense that they can do it."

Susan Bécam

A Legacy for Literacy: Memoir Writing

Susan Bécam doesn't have her own office in the Newton Free Library, but that's probably for the best; she would never have time to sit in it anyway. "At least once a month, Susan was letting me know about a new service or activity for the program," says Kathy Glick-Weil, the former library director who hired Bécam in 2001 to serve as the Legacy for Literacy coordinator. "She took Legacy for Literacy from a barely viable program to an intrinsic part of the library's mission." Founded in 1992 as the library's free tutoring program, Legacy for Literacy had been serving about 40 adult English-language learners in and around the Newton area - until Bécam came along. Now there are over 200 volunteer tutors and 300 students from all over the world. "My vision," says Bécam, "is to help as many learners as possible gain confidence using English so that they may become active members of our community." The learners, however, aren't the only ones blossoming into active community participants. Bécam inspires intense loyalty and devotion from an ever-growing pool of tutors as well; as Glick-Weil noted, "there is little they won't do to help Susan and improve our services."

Bécam herself would be the first to tout the tutors' commitment as a critical force behind the continual expansion of Legacy for Literacy. In addition to the ongoing one-to-one and small group instruction, the program also offers, according to a litany that lights up Bécam's face, "seven conversation groups, two Short Story Reading Groups, a Book Discussion Group, a Creative Writing Workshop, bi-annual Potluck Suppers, Citizenship classes (which have a 100% success rate), and several new multi-part ESL classes, including a class on 'Personal and Family Health Care,' one on 'You and Your Child's School,' and another on 'Heroes and Heroines in American History,' which is for our intermediate and advanced students."

As the steward for this eclectic and expansive



Susan Bécam is the ESL/Literacy Coordinator at the Newton Free Library where she nurtures a vibrant and successful adult tutoring program that is truly a community effort.

volunteer-based program, Susan Bécam offers a unique combination of vision and practicality. Despite her 25-plus years of teaching experience; a PhD in French Language and Literature; and an enormously successful program under her belt, Bécam is modest and soft-spoken about her achievements, preferring to focus on the students and tutors instead. Her beliefs are not expressed in soaring platitudes; her convictions are practical, about the real work that it takes to build a lasting, successful program that meets people's needs. "I believe," she says, "that all students should receive

“ My vision,” says Bécam, “is to help as many learners as possible gain confidence using English so that they may become active members of our community.” The learners, however, aren't the only ones blossoming into active community participants. ”

help in a timely manner. I also believe that multiple opportunities for students to improve their English reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills are essential. And I believe in thorough, ongoing support for tutors, in order to enhance the learning experience for students.”

Debby Goss

Shared Inquiry through Junior Great Books

Hanging in the entrance of the Horace Mann Middle School in Franklin, Massachusetts is a quote from the Mann himself that reads “Let us not be content to wait to see what will happen, but give us the determination to make the right things happen.” It seems endlessly fitting that Debbie Goss works here. As the school’s reading specialist for 17 years, Goss has become an expert at making the right things happen – not only for her students but also for the teachers she works with, and the district she works in. “In all my years,” says colleague Christina Renaud, the school’s librarian, “I have never met a more dedicated teacher, who after thirty plus years of teaching is still excited to try new things, and who never turns her back on a student or a teacher.” Principal Anne Bergen, who began at Horace Mann Middle School the same year as Debbie Goss, wholeheartedly agrees. “Goss’ students adore her,” she says, “and they achieve at extraordinary levels. Her colleagues respect her with a fierce intensity.”

It’s easy to see where the adoration, and the respect, comes from. Goss is delightful in person – charming, and funny, with an ease around her students that comes only through decades of work. “I used to practice teaching on my younger brother,” she says, laughing at the memory. “I’ve wanted to be a teacher forever.” Goss got her official start at an elementary school, teaching 2nd and 3rd grade. “It was a very old school,” she says, “an old classroom, just desks, nothing else. But I thought it was the most beautiful classroom I’d ever seen.” Of course, that didn’t stop her from making sure that her current classroom looks nothing like that first one. There are papers, posters, books, and markers bursting from every corner of the room. There’s a vanilla-scented candle on the table – “sometimes the kids need a little calming down when they first come in,” she explains – and green paper bookworms crawling across the windows. It’s a happy clutter, and the students are at home among it all.

She, likewise, is quite at home among them. Some people, particularly those with a thick skin and a good



Debby Goss, Reading Specialist at the Horace Mann Middle School, is a quiet leader who inspires both her students and colleagues to shine.

sense of humor, have a knack for middle schoolers, and Goss, who has raised three boys of her own, deserves a special place in that category. The first 6th graders she taught have 6th graders of their own by now, so Goss has seen a good many pre-teens come and go. “They’re still the same as always,” she says, lightly rolling her eyes. “Goofy and emotional. They want to do well, even though they pretend they don’t.” Which isn’t to say that things around the teens haven’t changed over all these years, and Goss is reflective as she talks about that. “The biggest changes,” she says, “have been changes in technology. We have SmartBoards and laptops – where it used to be all you had was a blackboard. Now we have information at our fingertips and it’s so easy to connect to background knowledge. Kids can make presentations and it’s more fun for them. But still,” she continues,

“It was a very old school” she says, “an old classroom, just desks, nothing else. But I thought it was the most beautiful classroom I’d ever seen.”

wistful now, the reading specialist come to the fore, “the majority of kids don’t read as much as they used to. With so many kids spending hours playing video games, there’s not as much interaction with language.”

It was this realization, in part, that led to Goss’

Haydee Hodis

Connecting Cultures: Conversational English Program

In 1994, when Haydee Hodis had been manager for six years, the Brightwood Branch of the Springfield City Library flooded. “Hundreds of books floating everywhere,” Hodis remembers, shaking her head. She gestures to a shelf that is chest-high. “The water went all the way up to here, and we lost three quarters of our collection. We had to completely rebuild.” And rebuild they did. Not fifteen years later, the Brightwood Branch is a beautiful, open, airy, and welcoming library, flourishing under Hodis’ continued leadership and dedication. “Well,” says Hodis, looking around while self-consciously shuffling books, “we’re working on it.”

Haydee Hodis is, needless to say, deeply unassuming. One gets the sense that, despite the honors and the accolades; despite the letters of appreciation written by kids, adults, and teachers throughout the community; despite the obvious loyalty of her staff and supervisors, Hodis sees herself as coming to work every morning simply to do her job, no more and no less. For her, it is not about going above and beyond; the level of excellence Hodis displays is only what she expects of herself – and what she feels she owes to her community and her fellow librarians. “I feel very fortunate,” she says, “to be in a profession that has as part of its mission, the promotion of the value of reading and self-expression among young people.” It is undoubtedly this generosity of spirit – the idea that she is lucky to have the library instead of the other way around – that makes Hodis such a force for good in her community.

“Haydee has demonstrated initiative and creativity in developing many new services and programs,” says longtime Springfield City Library Assistant Director Molly Fogarty, “particularly ones that engage the Hispanic community and promote library resources.” Approximately 30 percent of Springfield’s 150,000 residents identify themselves as Latino; within the schools, the number rises to 50 percent. It is these Spanish-speaking students and residents with whom



As a Branch Manager for the Springfield City Library, **Haydee Hodis** reaches out into the community with services and programs to engage a diverse population and to promote library resources.

Hodis has the strongest bond. Born and raised in Peru, she is particularly committed to bi-lingual and bi-cultural programming that both reaches out to new audiences and takes her back to her own roots. It was Hodis who developed and initiated the Springfield City Library’s Bilingual Story Times for pre-school and school age children and Hodis who collaborated in the creation of early literacy and child development workshops for Latino family child care providers. In both these cases, Hodis says, “the library was the scenario to better their lives and change them for the best. That in itself is the most rewarding experience; seeing lives being transformed with the power of the word.”

Hodis’ word is powerful indeed. “Her native talents

“Coming from a country where libraries are almost non-existent, I really appreciate what you can find in them – the resources, the connections – with school, yes, and also with life.”

have made her a hit with her special needs classes in her Read Aloud programs,” says colleague Geneva Caffee. “Haydee continues to amaze teachers and students alike with her enthusiastic storytelling and her craft skills.”

Isabel Phillips

Boston Arts Academy: Advanced Study in Reading Program

If you ever meet Isabel Phillips – and you should – you will be, like so many who have gone before you, immediately and irrevocably charmed. “Isabel is completely engaging,” says Linda Nathan, co-head of the Boston Arts Academy. “Not to mention innovative, creative, committed and passionate.” Fellow Literacy Champion Sherry Comerchero agrees: “I have never met another individual who can inspire, support, and enlighten as she does.” Born and raised in South Carolina, Phillips, who could fill a book of inspirational quotations in under an hour, is a hilarious and wonderful combination of southern belle, ‘60s activist, academic researcher, and new age guru.

But “first and foremost,” she says, she is “a teacher of literacy.” Phillips earned her stripes early, teaching kids of boot campers at a military base in South Carolina. “I



Isabel Phillips, Reading, Language & Learning Abilities Consultant, is first and foremost a teacher of literacy whose work focuses on helping those who struggle to learn to read and write.

since. It was Alexander Graham Bell who said, “When one door closes, another opens; but often we look so long and so regretfully upon the closed door, that we do not see the one that has opened for us.” Phillips, however, always sees the open door – and then she walks right through it. Her professional career is like a grand old

Southern mansion – lots of secret spaces and back passageways and rooms that look disconnected; until you see the floor plan, when it turns out everything was all linked together the whole time.

Phillips actually dropped out of high school (she likes telling this to the stunned high-school students she works with in the Boston Pilot Schools). There was a racially-charged incident

in a racially-charged time in a racially-charged state, and Phillips decided it was best to move on. She got her GED, and went directly to college at age sixteen. “There are all kinds of ways up the mountain,” she says, smiling. Phillips, of course, is a climber, and from college (via the boot campers), she made her way up north to earn her master’s and doctoral degrees in Reading and Language from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. For a time, she immersed herself in the neurology underlying language processing and reading, cross registering at the Harvard Medical School, and working with victims of brain trauma and language retrieval. “I was in hog heaven,” she says, closing her eyes and shaking her head slowly back and forth. She even applied to medical

“Well,” says Phillips, reflecting on her interdisciplinary path, “If you know something’s the right thing to do, you’ve got to go with it. You innovate, and you create, and you ask forgiveness later.”

was student teaching,” she says, laughing, “at a place with a 95 percent turnover rate where all the kids were taught by teachers working with different literacy programs.” But instead of giving her one full classroom like the others, the military presented Phillips with “an entire group of failing kids.” Some people might have quit on the spot, but some people aren’t Isabel Phillips. “Working with them was great,” she says. “They had all these incredible teachers, but they were still failing, independent of whatever program they were in. It focused me, very early, on when it’s not working, for whom, and what we can do about it. It was like I got twelve years of experience in one year.”

And a hundred years of experience in the thirty years

Meet the 2008 Literacy Champions



DULANY ALEXANDER
Operation Bootstrap
ESL Teacher & Technology
Coordinator Lynn

Dulany Alexander is a veteran ABE teacher who spends her vacations rebuilding Katrina-destroyed houses in Mississippi and constructing computer labs in El Salvador. Inspired perhaps by experiences like these, and by her own educational experiences as well, Dulany is a particularly “warm, loving and patient teacher,” according to a former student. “As a child,” Dulany explains, “I found school to be an intimidating place where the last thing we wanted was to have the teacher know we didn’t understand. But it’s important that students see us as being on the same team because if they protect themselves from us, then I can’t help them.” And it’s clear that helping them – and everyone else – is the most important thing to this dedicated woman.



SHERRY ALLEMAN
Title I Director
Milford Public Schools

Sherry Alleman is a true multi-tasker. From beauty salon owner and mother of three to Title I Director for the Milford Public Schools / 7th Grade Reading Specialist / President-Elect of the Nobscot Reading Council / author / editor of Primer / frequent keynote speaker / (and still mother of three), Sherry lives her life in service of the belief that “all students can learn.” Sherry, who was inspired to join the educational world after being a room parent in her child’s second grade classroom, defines herself as a “latecomer to education.” Still, as a colleague remarks, “Sherry’s got more experience in this field than practically anyone I’ve ever met” and it’s clear that this world is where she is meant to be.



SANDY BLANES
Director, Center for ELLs Support Services
Cambridge College, Lawrence Campus

Sandy Blanes – teacher of 30 years, mother of 8 children, author of the “English in 24 Hours” curriculum – has lived about 9 lives. She’s built an orphanage in Brazil; translated parent materials for the Federation of Special Needs; become an advocate; become a trainer of advocates; taught college classes; and devel-

oped the “Ladder to Language” program at Cambridge College in Lawrence, MA, which received a \$25,000 ESL Technology Grant from Verizon this past year. But while Sandy climbs up her own ladder, the students always keep her grounded. “Each student,” she says, “has their own life, their own goal, and their own celebration. Seeing them in the college classroom...all the effort is worthwhile.”



JEAN CANOSA-ALBANO
Manager of Youth and Outreach Services
Springfield City Library

Jean Canosa-Albano is a woman ahead of the curve. “She embraced mentoring long before it became the buzz word in the library profession,” says her colleague at the Springfield City Library. Manga and graphic novels, suddenly all the rage, have been adorning Jean’s library shelves for over a decade. Indeed, Jean has long made it a practice to reach out to new and underserved populations, whether by getting grants to enhance programming, materials, and book collections in other languages; loading MP3 players with books to reach teens through their mediums; supporting library access for people with disabilities; or developing the library’s current slogan – “A Place for You” (and you, and you, and you). At Jean’s library, everyone is always welcome.



MARTHA JEAN
ABE Teacher
Community Action, Haverhill

Yoga as a teaching tool? Sunglasses in class? Pine and vanilla scented pencils for test-taking? Absolutely, says Martha Jean, ABE / ESL teacher and trainer extraordinaire from Community Action, Inc. in Haverhill. “Atmosphere is important,” she explains. “Students do better if they’re stress free.” Martha understands that “stress free” is a rare condition in these students’ lives – in addition to their hectic worlds, students in adult education often suffer from attention difficulties and learning disorders. But Martha’s classroom, built in response to her students’ lives, is a refuge, a creative home where multiple intelligences and different learning styles are all valued equally. “Students in my classroom,” she says, “have a lot of laughter, a lot of learning, and a lot of success.”

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