



# LITERACY MATTERS

*The Quarterly Newsletter of the Oakland Literacy Council / Winter 2019*

## Gift of Confidence

Last November, Sunghee cast a ballot in the midterm elections, her first time voting as an American citizen. It was a proud moment she had scarcely envisioned for herself six years ago when she contacted Oakland Literacy Council.

Back then, the mother of three was totally dependent on her husband. She didn't understand most Americans when they spoke, and they had trouble understanding her. Although she had studied some English in her native South Korea, the lessons hadn't prepared her for life in her new country. "I didn't have any confidence," she recalls. "I was afraid to go outside."

**Thanks to you,** Oakland Literacy Council matched Sunghee with Denise, a trained volunteer who became Sunghee's first American friend and helped her master her adopted language. "Denise is really wonderful," Sunghee says. "She showed me how to survive here."

Week after week, Sunghee and Denise met at Novi Public Library. They practiced vocabulary. They read stories. They talked and talked and talked. Every week, Sunghee had homework. Sometimes, the pair met elsewhere in the community. When Sunghee wanted to learn how to manage money, Denise took her to the bank. When she wanted to pump her own gas, they went to the filling station. When parent-teacher conferences came around, they role-played a typical conversation. *(continued on next page)*

Celebrating  
**35** Years

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## “I have a lot of confidence now. My eyes are bigger. My vision is wider,” Sunghee says.

Sunghee’s reading, speaking and listening skills gradually improved. Eventually, she could understand materials written at the ninth-grade level. Then Sunghee began to think big. **She set two goals for herself: become an American citizen and get a job outside the home.** “I wanted to stay here with my family,” she says. “I wanted to be an American.”

In 2018, she started working as a food server in the cafeteria at Novi High School. She staffs the sandwich station, where her conversation skills come in handy, especially when repeat customers ask for the “usual.” She jokes: “Whenever I see their faces, I can remember what kind of cheese and meat and whether they want a pickle.”

**To become a citizen,** Sunghee had to pass an oral interview with an immigration official and a civics exam. To prepare, she and Denise studied the branches of government, key amendments to the

Constitution, and the names of their elected representatives.

Last August, Sunghee passed her interview. In September, she stood before a federal judge in Detroit and took the oath of citizenship.

Eager to exercise her newly-earned right to vote, she read up on the candidates and issues. “I was excited,” she says. On Election Day, she headed to the polls with her daughters, ages 12 and 7. All three left with “I Voted” stickers affixed to their coat lapels.

She continues to meet with Denise to practice her listening skills, but she’s proud of how far she has come. “I have a lot of confidence now,” she says. “My eyes are bigger. My vision is wider.”

**Because of generous donors like you,** Sunghee has gained literacy skills that enabled her to become a citizen and a contributing member of the local economy. **Thank you for supporting our mission. You are changing lives.**

## 2018 Accomplishments at Oakland Literacy Council

- ✓ Trained and certified 94 new tutors while offering professional development workshops for existing tutors.
- ✓ Moved to a new location that is more convenient to tutors and students and that has a light-filled library and better space for meeting and testing.
- ✓ Expanded our library for student-tutor pairs, adding many new books aligned with the federally-recognized CASAS assessment tool.
- ✓ Launched conversation groups for English language learners throughout Oakland County that meet weekly for several weeks at a time.
- ✓ Piloted a workplace writing workshop for native-born students with low-literacy who were interested in improving their job prospects.
- ✓ Provided an online learning platform as a supplement to face-to-face tutoring for our students.
- ✓ Graduated 41 students and assessed 227 existing students and 135 potential students.
- ✓ Partnered with Michigan Office of New Americans to host meetups for highly-educated immigrants focused on interviewing and other workplace skills.
- ✓ Joined with Michigan Works! to pilot 12-hour classes for immigrants seeking employment.



**“We’re one of the wealthiest counties in the United States, and to think that we have thousands of people who cannot read is absolutely appalling.”**

**Bob Gaylor**

## Our Founder Looks Back

**The late First Lady Barbara Bush and Bob Gaylor. Without them, Oakland Literacy Council might not exist.**

More than three decades ago, the former First Lady shared startling data about adult illiteracy at the American Library Association’s annual conference. Among those listening in the audience was Bob Gaylor, representing Oakland University’s Kresge Library. Bob found the data hard to believe. But back at home, conversations with others convinced him that even in a well-off county like ours, adults struggled to read and write.

**Bob founded Oakland Literacy Council in 1984** in a tiny office in Pontiac with one part-time employee and a \$5,000 grant. Since then, Bob has been a tireless champion, serving on the council’s board and convincing others to support the council with their time, talent, and treasure.

In the early days, he pitched the council to the editor and publisher of *The Oakland Press*, then Bruce McIntyre. “I asked him to imagine that more than 100,000 residents couldn’t read his newspaper,” Bob recalls. Stunned, McIntyre wrote the council a generous check.

Later, Bob helped established The Motor City Food and Wine Festival to raise private funds for literacy programs in Wayne, Macomb, and Oakland Counties. He says, “We raised about \$20,000” for programs in the tri-county area.

More recently, Bob has designated the Oakland Literacy Council as a major benefactor of his estate. “Next month, I’ll be 80,” he says. “I decided I should specify where my money goes. **Although the council has served thousands of adults over the last 35 years, there’s more work to be done. I don’t think we’re ever going to be out of a job.**”

More than  
**10,000**  
Adults served over the last 35 years

## Unmet Demand

Currently, the Oakland Literacy Council serves about 200 adults who live or work in Oakland County. However, our waiting list is long. The council’s Board of Directors adopted new student eligibility criteria, effective this year.

**Adults with the lowest levels of literacy will remain our top priority.** These adults will receive one-on-one tutoring to gain language skills essential for survival and routine social demands, such as completing simple forms, reading charts and labels, and following simple instructions.

**Advanced students must be pursuing one of these three goals:**



...to obtain a high school equivalency credential



...to improve their job prospects



...to become a U.S. citizen (if the student is foreign born)





In my own words . . .

## Volunteer Sue Abbey

*Before retiring from the corporate world, Sue provided executive coaching and worked extensively with global teams in Europe and Asia. She has a doctorate degree in adult and continuing education.*

The ability to read, write, and speak English affects so many areas—from buying groceries, to getting a job, to reading memos sent home from a child’s school. Having lived and worked overseas, I know firsthand how important these skills are in daily life.

During my five years of volunteering with the council, I have focused on English language learners. I’ve tutored students from South Korea, Brazil, Japan, and Mexico. **Each one has been a joy and provided me with a different perspective on world events and life in the U.S.**

In addition to one-on-one tutoring, I’ve had the privilege of facilitating ESL conversation groups. These are fun events, where we discuss everything from idiomatic expressions to making airline reservations by phone. Sometimes we play word games like Taboo and Telephone. A typical group has students from four or more countries, so there

are plenty of experiences, traditions, and laughs to share.

This spring, I will facilitate my fourth English Meetup Group for skilled immigrants seeking employment. **Past participants are now working in professional recruitment, architecture, finance, and program management.** It’s rewarding to experience their excitement of landing a job and successfully completing their first week of work.

I am thankful to OLC, not only for these wonderful connections, but also for the resources and support. Student testing fosters effectiveness and efficiency by helping tutors know where to start, where progress is being made, and what areas need additional work. OLC’s library of materials and tutor workshops save time and money for tutors, while providing creative ideas and approaches. This is one reason why I support the OLC financially, in addition to volunteering.

**I encourage you to get involved with the OLC.** I am confident that, like me, you will enjoy making a difference in people’s lives.

ProLiteracy reports:

# 36 million

adults in the United States cannot read, write or do basic math above a third-grade level.

# 43 percent

of adults with the lowest literacy levels live in poverty.

# 72 percent

The chance that children whose parents have low literacy levels will read at the lowest levels themselves.

## Thank You

The following sponsors helped make our annual Ex-Libris fundraiser a success:

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