

Literacy Matters

Newsletter for Donors and Friends of Oakland Literacy Council

You're making a difference!

Bringing Digital Literacy to Oakland County

Oakland Literacy Council is working hard to bridge the "digital divide" in Oakland County, helping adults left behind because they lack technology, internet access, and computer skills.

The Council raised more than \$100,000 in 2020 to hire a digital literacy coordinator, provide hardware and software, and deliver computer-skills training to adults in Oakland County. "We know that low-income communities and communities of color are disproportionately affected by a lack of digital access," says Executive Director Lisa Machesky. "By helping adults bridge the digital divide, they can become fully literate, secure higher-paying jobs, and help their children learn."

As part of this major initiative, adult learners receive laptops and complete the Northstar Digital Literacy curriculum to earn certificates demonstrating their computer proficiency--proof of job skills they can share with potential employers.

"This is something I'm doing to build myself up," says Ms. Jackson, a Pontiac resident who never had a computer before. Now, she has weekly computer lessons with the digital literacy coordinator and online reading classes with a trained literacy tutor. She says she's better able to support her children, who are doing online school from home.

Funding for this initiative came from the United Way for Southeastern Michigan, the Oakland County Library Board, Oakland Together Community Response and Recovery Fund, and the Lula Wilson Trust.



Newly hired digital literacy coordinator, Patti Shayne, (left) helps a learner navigate a new laptop provided by the Council.

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Law firm Kemp Klein's foundation is long-time donor

Donor



Spotlight

Three-quarters of all prison inmates did not complete high school or can be classified as low literate, according to the U.S. Justice Department.

Lawyers at the Kemp Klein Law Firm in Troy have long recognized the link between problems like low literacy—and hunger—and criminal behavior, and they have recognized the need for law firms to provide pro bono work. Twenty-six years ago, the law firm established a foundation to support charities dedicated to tackling those societal problems, according to Ralph Castelli, chairman of the board and CEO.

Ever since then, the firm's foundation has made Oakland Literacy Council one of its chief beneficiaries. Members of the firm contribute to the Kemp, Klein, Umphrey, Endelman, and May Foundation through direct donations and dress-down days. Castelli said he first learned of the Council's mission while participating in Leadership Oakland many years ago.

As the list of charities supported by the foundation has grown, support for the Council has



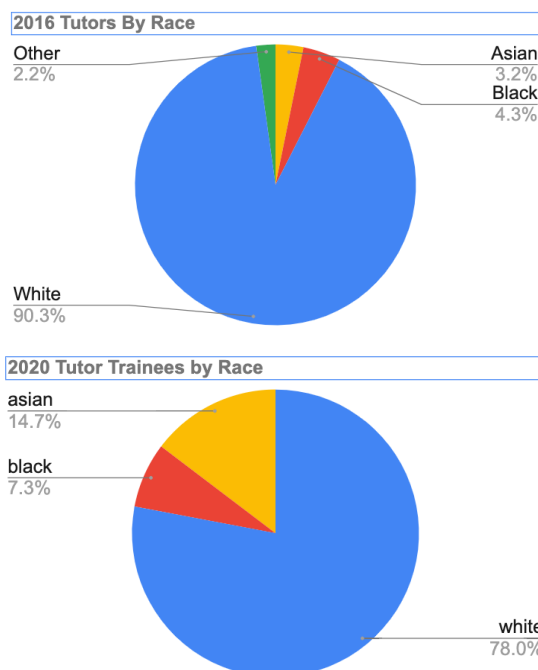
Debbie and Ralph Castelli also support literacy efforts through the Motor City Wine and Food Festival.

remained consistent. Castelli and his wife, Debbie, attend the Council's Ex Libris annual fundraiser, along with other members of the firm. Their favorite Ex Libris memories include having dinner with hockey great Gordie Howe and wife, Colleen, and Castelli's reunion each year with his fifth grade teacher, Ellie Robertson, a fellow literacy advocate. The Council is grateful for the consistent and substantial support received by the Kemp Klein Law Firm over the years.

Broadening diversity

Volunteer literacy tutors recruited in 2020 were **younger and more racially diverse** than in the past. This diversity reflects both the Council's *Commitment to Change* and the shift to remote learning that allowed people who live across the country and those who work day jobs to volunteer.

English language learner Karla del Bousque might have waited a long time for a tutor who lived near her home in rural South Lyon. Instead, she was placed with Kajol Char, a 23-year-old professional in New York City eager to make a difference in the life of another adult. "You can still cultivate a relationship with someone virtually, and you can really help them," Kajol says.



Helping Immigrant and Refugee Parents

Helping schoolchildren navigate online learning this fall in the midst of a pandemic was a challenge for many parents, but especially so for parents who are immigrants or refugees. Thanks to financial backing from the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan, however, the Council was able to support these parents through a speaker series and conversation groups.

The conversation groups brought together parents of similar-aged children. "I think the parents looked forward to it," said Karen Rock, who facilitated a group of five parents of elementary-aged children for two months. The immigrant mothers shared their feelings of isolation in a new country, an isolation worsened by staying home during the pandemic.



Educational experts from Oakland Schools shared community resources for multi-lingual parents.

They practiced their English listening and speaking skills while offering each other help with everything from cooking and their children's schooling to addressing the sadness felt by one woman's son, Karen said.



New Reading Curriculum

Several of our U.S.-born students read at a very low level due to dyslexia or some other reading disability. This past summer, the Council invested in the Barton Reading & Spelling System, a proven curriculum designed specifically to overcome those challenges.

The curriculum, which can also be delivered remotely, is multi-sensory and phonics based. For example, students pull down colored tiles representing consonants or vowels to form words. They tap their fingers while repeating sounds and write on the screen. The lessons are carefully scripted, so volunteers know exactly what to say and do to build a foundation in phonics.

"It's comprehensive," says volunteer Lisa Heinze, who also draws upon her experience as a former elementary classroom aide to tutor a 20-year-old learner, who had a brain condition that impaired her cognitive abilities. The lessons, Lisa says, "are organized and easy to use."

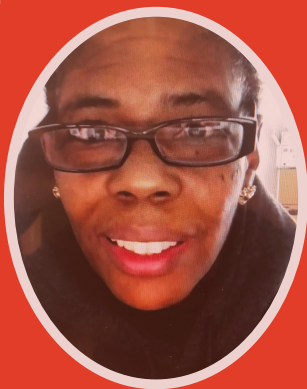
Outreach to Pontiac

It's a fact: in the midst of prosperous Oakland County, nearly three-quarters of the residents of Pontiac do not earn enough to meet their basic needs. Recognizing that low literacy is often behind underemployment or unemployment, the Council has reinvigorated its outreach efforts in Pontiac in recent months.

The Council has forged partnerships with several agencies in the Pontiac area to help spread the word that the Council can provide free tutoring for low-literate adults. Among the partnerships are the Pontiac Chamber of Commerce, the Pontiac Talent Development Coalition, which provides pre-apprenticeships to young adults, the CarNav Group, which provides career counseling, and Centro Multicultural La Familia, which serves the Hispanic community in Pontiac. In addition, the Pontiac office of Michigan Works! has been referring job seekers whose low literacy levels are a barrier to employment to the Council for tutoring. Finally, the Council is supporting parents through the Pontiac United Educational Coalition. The stepped-up outreach effort is made possible by a United Way for Southeastern Michigan grant for Adult Literacy in Pontiac.

Joy of Reading

As a child, Teresa Goin was punished by her mother for making mistakes when she read. Now, thanks to you, she's discovered the pleasure of reading.



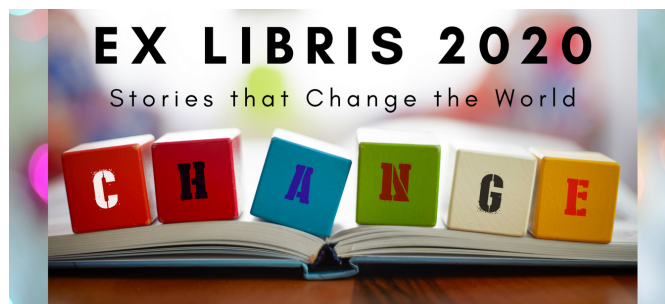
Teresa grew up without becoming a strong reader. But, with help from tutor Carol Johnson, Teresa has steadily improved, progressing from reading short passages to reading books of her own choosing. Teresa's current selection? *A Class Divided*, an account of schoolteacher Jane Elliott's famous experiment in discrimination based on appearance. This past summer's protests for racial justice sparked Teresa's interest in this book.

Earlier, Teresa enjoyed reading about the life of Janet Jackson, whose music she loves. She and Carol also read the diaries of the Freedom Writers, the Long Beach high schoolers thought to be unteachable who found their voice through writing.

Carol and Teresa usually get their books on Kindle and share the Kindle screen during their Zoom lessons. Teresa says, "Carol has been great. She's been really patient. She's been there for me."

43700 Woodward Avenue, Suite 20
Bloomfield Hills, MI 48302
248-253-1617
www.oaklandliteracy.com
info@oaklandliteracy.com

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Virtual fundraiser generates \$75,000

Special thanks to our sponsors who made the 2020 Ex Libris event the most successful ever. The event can be viewed at: <https://oakland.gaslightmedia.com/>.

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