

# Mountain Causes: Learning at the Literacy Council

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(Photo: Katie Bailey/[bkbailey@citizen-times.com](mailto:bkbailey@citizen-times.com))

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ASHEVILLE – Living in a country where I didn't speak the language was one of the hardest things I have ever done. It's so much more than knowing the basics of "hello," "thank you," "I want water" and "Where is the toilet?"

Being able to communicate is critical to survival. It's how you get the things you need and want. It's how you make friends and respectfully integrate into a new community. Language is how people learn about the world and make it better.

It's that basic message that drives the work of the Literacy Council of Buncombe County, which envisions a community where literacy is highly valued and achievable for all.

Improved literacy benefits not only the struggling reader, but everyone regardless of age, race, gender or background, said Ashley Lasher, executive director of the nonprofit.

It has the power to move people out of poverty and into better paying jobs, she said.

Using the specialized instruction of some 200 trained volunteers, the Literacy Council provides ongoing, hands-on, accessible tutoring for students of the English language.

While the majority of its work is focused on teaching English to immigrants, the small nonprofit also helps illiterate adults and struggling students learn how to read.

"The need is larger than our current capacity to serve," Lasher said.

The agency, which has a paid staff of five, provided over 15,700 hours of free instruction last year to some 350 clients. There are 136 people on its waiting list. More individuals could be served if there was more volunteer support, she added.

"It can be helpful for volunteer tutors to have background in speaking a foreign language or teaching, but it is absolutely not necessary," said Lasher. "Our tutor training prepares volunteers to be successful tutors regardless of their background and experiences."

Tutors take a practical approach and contextualize learning as much as possible, Lasher added. Clients are developing literacy competencies while also building life skills. If someone wants to improve their literacy and is also in the construction field, the Literacy Council would find resources and vocabulary relevant to that, she said.

Tutors also use books, flash cards and other games and activities to make lessons more interactive and fun.

There are three main reasons why people come to Literacy Council — they need better employment; they want to pass the citizenship test or a high school equivalency exam; or, they simply want to be able to help their children in school, said Lasher.

Nearly two-thirds of the students at the Literacy Council are enrolled in its English for Speakers of Other Languages Program. The majority come from the Spanish-speaking world, but the nonprofit has also helped immigrants from Eastern Europe, Asia and Africa.

"Going someplace where you don't know a language can be thrilling, exciting and wonderful, but it can also be terrifying and isolating," Lasher said to a group of volunteers at orientation last Wednesday.

There, trainees looked at everyday items like peanut butter jars and discussed all the English necessary to understand something as simple as an ingredient list.

At the office not far from downtown, photos of clients and their autobiographies line the walls. Maps are everywhere. There is no shortage of tales of the American Dream.

In one room, Ina Sanzana and Victor García study American history for the GED. Both came to America years ago for a better life. Their English is near fluent now, but they say it wasn't always that way.

Sanzana came from Santiago, Chile, and now cleans houses. When she first arrived, a woman she was working for asked her to put away a box in the garage. Sanzana heard the words "throw away." When her boss came looking for her belongings, Sanzana knew she needed more English help.

García, who is from Coatzacoalcos, a coastal town Veracruz, Mexico, said that while he was working at a grocery store he once mixed up the words "raisins" and "razors." The customer was so confused, he said, laughing.

García also didn't know his food vocabulary when he first arrived. When he was eating at a restaurant with someone else, he would always order "the same."

"I ate a lot of different foods that way," he said, smiling.

As they studied words like "suffrage," "civil rights," "amendment," "ratification" and "constitution," the two could not help but talk about the better life America has to offer. "I feel like I can call it my home now," said García. "America is filled with wonderful, great people. I have American friends. This country has been nice to me."

Nearby, Claudia Camacho and her tutor are practicing advanced English. Camacho and her husband came to the United States as political refugees from Bogotá, Columbia, in 2006. When she first arrived in the U.S., she couldn't even read the signs at the airport. She didn't how to hail a taxi or read a bus schedule. She couldn't find her luggage.

Camacho is now a teacher's assistant in the Spanish classroom at Glen Arden Elementary. She first came to the Literacy Council in 2012 to start studying for her citizenship test. With the help of her tutor, she passed on the first try. "It was so exciting," said Linda Van Tuyle, Camacho's teacher. "It was the first time I had ever done anything like that."

The people at the Literacy Council are all about creating firsts, said student Dustan Sanders of Weaverville. This place can change your life, he said.

At 26-years-old, Sanders is learning how to read.

"When he first came in here, he couldn't read 'at' or 'cat,'" said his tutor Stan Boyd also of Weaverville. "He's making tremendous progress."

The two started studying together in August. They go over letter sounds and read children's books. As Sanders sounds out letters, the two laugh at the silly stories.

In November, Sanders received a card for his birthday. Normally, he would just make up an excuse why someone else should read it aloud. This year, he gave it a try. "That was the first

time I ever did that," said Sanders, who formally studies at the Literacy Council three hours a week and practices everywhere he goes. "I did it fully without having to ask someone else for help."

Life can be incredibly challenging when you can't read, Sanders said. His friends would have to fill out job applications for him. Awhile back, he almost got lost driving home from out of state because he couldn't read the street signs or make his GPS work.

"I'm so proud of myself," said Sanders, who is dyslexic and graduated from his high school's special education program. "I tell just about anybody what I'm doing."

As I drove home that night, I couldn't help but be inspired. It takes a lot of courage to admit as an adult that you need help.

The words of Sanders' teacher lingered in my mind. "It's very rewarding to me, but really it's all about him," said Boyd. "The volunteers open the door and show the path, but it's up to Dustan to take it."

Boyd's comments made me think about how in first grade I was in the "special reading group." Today, I'm a journalist. I read and write for a living.

Sanders' goal is to read the Bible. "That's going to be real hard," he said, with a sigh. "I'm going to keep practicing, but I don't know if I can do it."

With his energy and passion, there is no doubt in my mind that Sanders can make his way all the way through Revelations. Someone send this man an early reader Bible. He deserves it.

This is the opinion of Beth Walton. Each week for this Mountain Causes column, I volunteer at an organization around Asheville and share my adventure with our readers. If you'd like me to help at your nonprofit, contact me at [bwalton@citizen-times.com](mailto:bwalton@citizen-times.com), [828-232-5851](tel:828-232-5851).

The Literacy Council of Buncombe County is in need of volunteer tutors. For more information, contact the organization at [828-254-3442](tel:828-254-3442) or [volunteers@litcouncil.com](mailto:volunteers@litcouncil.com). Learn more at [www.litcouncil.com](http://www.litcouncil.com).