



Literacy: Reaching for life's road map

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Imagine you are unemployed, and you hear about a job that you must consult a map to find. You need to know what the road map says, but you can't make it out, because you can't read.

Imagine you want to read a teacher's comments on your child's school work, or review a textbook, or just read to your child at bedtime. But you can't.

Imagine that you need to know what the instructions say on the medicine your doctor has just prescribed but that's impossible. You're illiterate.

This is the plight of some 20 percent of adults surveyed nationwide who are ranked as being illiterate in some way, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics.

Imagine the isolation a person in this situation must sometimes feel.

But where there's a need, there's sure to be a group of concerned citizens willing to give time to solve the problem.

Or is there?

The Tutor/Mentor Connections, a nonprofit, Chicago-based organization, tried to start a literacy volunteer effort in July in the Tri-Cities, hoping to help those who can't read or cannot read well enough to land a decent-paying job.

Two people showed up.

And while only one person can make a huge difference in another's life by volunteering, the meeting didn't result in any action, organizers said.

Still, it's persistence that pays off.

They will try again at 7:30 p.m. Thursday at the Barnes and Noble bookstore in Geneva Commons and will again promote this noble cause. This time, they hope more people will come.

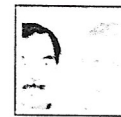
If you're looking for a way to spend some free time, becoming a literacy volunteer can be an excellent choice.

Imagine opening the world of words to someone who has never "feasted" on the works of Shakespeare, nor felt the adrenalin rush of reading a John Grisham novel, nor known the wonder of scanning the great universe of information on the World Wide Web.

What a gift to give, this gift of literacy.

Then why such a low turnout the first time a meeting was called? Granted there are some groups already trying to meet this need.

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Perhaps those who didn't show were asking themselves if there really is a need for literacy tutors in the affluent Fox Valley area. After all, illiteracy numbers are probably much lower here than in a metropolitan area, where poverty often keeps kids in badly performing schools. There, unless their luck changes, many grow up to be illiterate adults.

But helping just one person who cannot read, write or count is worth volunteering. To learn how many adults still need help in the 21st century, a National Adult Literacy Study is under way, with results expected to be released in 2005.

In 1992, a similar study showed that 23 percent of adults scored in the lowest literacy level. Of those, about 5 percent had refused to answer any survey questions, or couldn't answer.

John Miller, chancellor of the University of Wisconsin at Whitewater, agrees help is needed. Adults can learn to read, he said, even if 10 or 15 years of formal education has not made them readers. Miller recently released a study in which he ranked U.S. cities for literacy. He noted that Chicago ranked 45 out of 64 cities surveyed.

No tests were given, however. Instead Miller noted the population of each city, then compared the number of daily newspapers circulating and the number of bookstores there, with 20 small booksellers being potentially equal to a large store such as a Borders or a Barnes and Noble. He also counted each city's number of libraries and number of materials checked out annually and calculated school libraries' staffing numbers. Minneapolis, Minn., came out on top of his list for literate cities, and El Paso, Texas, was last.

When deciding whether or not this is a cause that you'd like to join, consider how you learned to read.

Perhaps you received the gift of literacy from a parent, grandparent, an aunt or uncle, a sibling, or a volunteer who selflessly wanted you to have the ability to read and gave it to you free.

Perhaps it came from a patient, persistent teacher in school, or was generated by the drive of competition when you figured out your classmates were catching on.

Perhaps you can't remember how you actually learned to read. Maybe you owe this great gift to Big Bird or a man named Mr. Rogers.

Whatever the source, you obviously have it. And it's a gift you can share with those who don't yet know the elation that can come from reading a good book or a revealing article.

Reading truly can be the key to the road map of life.

But until help arrives, so much of life for the illiterate people of this world will carry a sign they can't mistake: "Road closed." *Staff writer Louise Brass covers Geneva, Fermilab and various issues in the Tri-Cities.* Contact her at lbrass@scn1.com or (630) 416-5246.

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