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The vision to teach

Vision Literacy teaches reading, forges friendships throughout county

by Jennifer Pence

In the Bay Area, where many people achieve a fairly high level of education, it may be shocking to learn that one in five adults can't read above the eighth grade level, the standard benchmark for literacy.

Fortunately, Vision Literacy is here to help. Vision Literacy, one of the more than 20 programs in the Bay Area addressing adult literacy, serves most of Santa Clara County (minus the cities of Santa Clara and San Jose, which have their own programs) and operates out of libraries including the Mountain View Public Library. "Learners" in the program benefit from both one-on-one tutoring and group classes as they work toward the goal of 100 hours of literacy tutoring in one year, an amount that Vision Literacy finds will advance most learners by one grade level in reading ability.

"We do everything in our power to get the learner to advance in reading skills one grade level in one year," says Steve Toy of the Friends of VL board of directors.

Diagnostic tests and follow-up assessment tests after a year reveal that 75 percent of learners have indeed improved one grade level, and most of the 25 percent who did not were unable to complete their 100 hours of learning, frequently due to the time constraints of working multiple jobs. Vision Literacy is currently focused on increasing its group classes to give learners the maximum number of opportunities to attend a class each week.

Its success has enabled it to become one of the five California literacy programs (out of 110) to meet the accreditation standards of ProLiteracy, the national umbrella organization for local literacy programs, which also provides VL's curriculum.

Learners come from a variety of backgrounds — 25 to 30 percent speak English as a second language, and the rest speak English as a first language but have learning disabilities or other issues that have prevented them from mastering reading. Some learners even have high school diplomas; Steve Toy says his learner had graduated from Santa Clara High School but could not read "Cat in the Hat" when they first met.

To address different learning styles, Vision Literacy uses different approaches, including phonics and a picture-based approach. To learn these approaches, new tutors (who are not required to have any previous teaching experience) attend 15 hours of training. There is also periodic follow-up training that

previous teaching experience) attend 15 hours of training. There is also periodic follow-up training that tutors can attend if they wish.

For example, Mountain View resident and VL tutor Gary Steinbach says that a follow-up one-day training on the importance of syllables helped him move his learner forward in a new way. Says Gary, "What I love most about VL is their great support. Whether I need a book or advice on how to handle a situation, the VL staff is always available."

Sept. 8 is International Literacy Day, so now is a great time to refer a learner to VL at (408) 262-1349 or to call to volunteer. VL is always looking for new tutors as well as volunteers to help with fundraising, marketing and community outreach. Additionally, VL would appreciate donations of computers, books and, of course, money.

VL's learners benefit on an ongoing basis from their literacy training, but so do the tutors. Steinbach summarizes: "I don't just have a learner, I have a friend who's had a whole bunch of life experiences that are different from mine. Tutoring with Vision Literacy has been life-changing."

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