



The Literacy Alliance

Literacy News

A quarterly publication of the Literacy Alliance

2009 Issue I

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Paw Paw Lay and volunteer tutor Dave Worley review Paw Paw's homework at The Literacy Alliance's Burmese tutoring site. Centered in the former Benoit Academy classrooms at St. Henry Catholic Church, the site helps Burmese immigrants with rudimentary English and basic life skills.

TLA Helps Burmese Refugees

Last September, The Literacy Alliance's Burmese tutoring site moved from the Autumn Woods Apartments to the former Benoit Academy at St. Henry Catholic Church. The change was significant, bringing students from a one bedroom apartment to full classrooms. The new site provided a room for each learning level, beginning, intermediate, and advanced, as well as child care.

The classrooms contained little more than tables and chairs. The absence of amenities like curtains, carpeting, and soft seating created a tinny hubbub up and down the main hallway. The absence and hubbub, however, made no difference to the students who, quick to smile and eager to learn, paid close attention to their tutors.

"Seven months," Hsei E. Moo from the intermediate level said through Paw Paw Lay from the advanced level when asked how long she'd been coming to the tutoring site. Hsei started with the alphabet and progressed to some writing, mainly filling out forms. She declared that filling out a job application was the most difficult thing she worked on so far.

Hsei and Paw Paw had taken a break from their lessons to share their experiences. Coincidentally, both had come to the United States from the same refugee camp, Umphem in Thailand.

Paw Paw's ten months with the site helped her to

improve her spoken English. She began in the advanced level with seven other students. As they got work, their attendance dwindled, and Paw Paw alone attended regularly. The advanced tutor Dave Worley gave regular homework, and the students returned with completed assignments that all could review and learn from.

The Literacy Alliance's Burmese initiative began early last year. The agency wanted to address the needs of Allen County's growing Burmese population. It helped in any way it could within its mission, training ESL tutors, funding materials, and coordinating small group tutoring. Its efforts resulted in St. Henry where overall the volunteer tutors helped students with rudimentary English and basic life skills for two two-hour sessions every week.

In addition to St. Henry's support, the site depends on a core of dedicated volunteers and funders. Along with Dave, volunteers Sandra Vance and Deborah Carr have worked with the Burmese from the beginning. Generous funding has been received from Our Lady of Victory Mission and the Florence M. and Paul M. Staehle Foundation.

When asked about life in the refugee camp, Paw Paw explained that there was no freedom. Though they could at-

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Burmese Immigrants, continued from page 1

tend church and had access to health care and education, they could not come and go as they pleased.

Paw Paw and her family went to their first refugee camp when she was eleven years old and soldiers burned their village. They lived there for ten years until soldiers burned them out again. They fled to Umpheim where they lived for eight years in relative security as it was supervised by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Their house was on a steep hill, making for arduous trips to the food bank. It was unheated too, and Paw Paw said it was cold all the time.

Concluding her description of life in the refugee camps, Paw Paw emphasized how happy she was to be able to start life again, despite the difficulties. She liked the United States where she and her family enjoyed liberty and the same rights as everyone else.

While Paw Paw and Hsei were returning to their lessons, an elderly Burmese man showed up with a bicycle. He struggled to bring it through the entrance. Reaching for the door, a visitor said, "Good morning." The man smiled and with a nod answered, "Good morning!" then proudly added, "This is my school!"

Literacy Alliance Graduate Receives \$1,000 Scholarship

On February 26, Tony Oakley attended the Fort Wayne Community Schools and Literacy Alliance GED Graduation event. He received the \$1,000 Literacy Alliance Scholarship at the reception then walked onstage with sixty other graduates to receive a diploma at the commencement ceremony.

When his daughter, the youngest of his three older children, graduated from high school, Tony wasn't sure what to do with himself. She reminded him that he'd always talked about going back to school and getting the GED. "Well, why don't you do that?" she asked.

Twenty five years ago, high school was not for Tony. "I hated it," he declared. Also, his friends were dropping out and making good money at Harvester, Essex Wire, Freuhauf, and other manufacturing companies. His first job was at Waste Management. "I've been driving a truck since I was eighteen," he said.

Currently, he drives for Irving Gravel and confirms that it is a good job with good pay and benefits. It helped him

to make ends meet while raising his three older children. But its unpredictable hours kept him from their school and sports activities. During the busy season between Easter and Thanksgiving, "you don't know from day to day when you'll get off." His workday begins at five in the morning and goes until the job is done. Over his nine years with the company, a realization has grown that opportunities for advancement are limited.

In February 2008, he enrolled in The Literacy Alliance's Fellowship Learning Center. But he was only able to attend a couple of months before the busy season began. He approached Site Coordinator Cathi Counterman about withdrawing, and she urged him to take the GED exam.

Uncertain about his math skills, Tony took the exam in July. His uncertainties persisted until he received the results in August. He described gingerly opening and peeking into the letter in which the results arrived. Something fell out of the envelope, and his son picked it up. "Hey, Dad. Looks like you passed." It was Tony's certificate of completion.

Now he studies nursing at Ivy Tech. His plan is to earn an associates degree, get work, then go back for a bachelors degree. He wants work that more directly helps people. In addition to his three older children, Tony has three who are still in school, and he wants work with regular, traditional hours so he can go to their activities.

Though he'd applied for the Literacy Alliance Scholarship, Tony didn't know he was going to be this year's recipient. He had another overriding reason for going to the graduation event. "I'm going for my mother," he said. Though she's attended her grandchildren's graduations, Tony's mother has never attended a commencement ceremony for her own children.



William Anthony "Tony" Oakley is the recipient of this year's \$1,000 Literacy Alliance Scholarship. The scholarship is awarded to Literacy Alliance students who are heading for college or vocational school. The agency is able to give the scholarship through its endowment fund at the Community Foundation of Greater Fort Wayne. Tony is working towards a nursing degree at Ivy Tech.

GED Reception Celebrates Graduates' Accomplishment



The 2009 GED reception welcomed the GED graduates of 2008 who attended with family and friends at the Scottish Rite ballroom. Literacy Alliance staff and board members were there with Anthis staff and local elected officials to celebrate the graduates' accomplishment. Altogether 200 enjoyed light refreshments and a chance to relax before the big event, graduation upstairs in the auditorium.



In anticipation of the graduation ceremony, graduates wore their caps and gowns. All at the informal February 26 event celebrated with hors d'oeuvres. Literacy Alliance board members welcomed guests as they arrived. At the lectern, graduates Merima Begic and Georgina Estes recounted their challenges and successes. After an hour of conversation and congratulations, the graduates went upstairs to the auditorium for the graduation ceremony.



Literacy Alliance graduate Georgina Estes (center) spoke at the reception.

Downsizing where she worked for twenty-two years put Georgina out of a job. Looking for work, she learned that "To my amazement, I could not find a job without a high school diploma." Georgina explained to those attending the reception that in her life she'd been a sous-chef at an upscale restaurant and a manager at a mobile home park. "Now, I could not qualify for driving a bus for Fort Wayne Community Schools."

To remedy this "I made a giant and, for me at the time, very frightening step" and called The Literacy Alliance.



When Merima Begic came to the United States from Bosnia, she had "twenty dollars in my pocket and nobody to help me. . . I didn't speak any English. Since then, she has worked to take care of her family and earn the GED.

Merima told her story to other graduates and their families and friends at the reception. Beginning in August 2008, she prepared for the GED exam at The Literacy Alliance's Anchor Learning Center. By December, she passed it.

Thanks to Individuals & Organizations for Their Generous Support

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Announcements

February 6 was a great night at the Coliseum. Spectators watched the Komets check the Flint Generals, 3-1. They also saw Comcast "check" The Literacy Alliance with \$5,000 before face off. February 6 was the 2009 Report Card Night sponsored by Comcast and the Komets. The event rewards area students for getting good grades. Those who earned A's on their report cards received free admission to the game.

The Literacy Alliance continues to have intake sessions for its adult literacy programs. Morning and evening sessions are available. Each session lasts about two and a half hours. Adults interested in strengthening their basic skills or preparing for the GED® Tests must register for one of the sessions by calling The Literacy Alliance, 426-7323.

In addition to its web site, www.fwliteracyalliance.org, The Literacy Alliance is using more internet-based technology to expand service and raise awareness about its work. The agency has joined the 175 million who use Facebook and has created a virtual classroom, <http://sites.google.com/site/acplclassroom>. Facebook friends and fans can learn about the agency and view pictures and stories about events and activities. The virtual classroom links to adult basic education and English as a second language resources

The Literacy Alliance welcomes new volunteers Holly Allison, Jo Buffalino, Bill Burkhart, Julie George, Marissa Guyton, Barbara Hering, Mary Knopp, Joan Lewis, Noel Maze, Iva Parrish, Thad Smith, Corrine Toth, and Shirley Wassel.

The next set of tutor training workshops will be 9:30 a.m. - 2:30 p.m. on April 18 and 25 at the Main Branch of the Allen County Public Library. For more information, call Laura at The Literacy Alliance, 426-7323.

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From the Director's Desk

The Literacy Alliance has experienced some ups and downs since our last newsletter. While we have made the difficult decision to end programs, we have been serving adult students more efficiently in a variety of ways.

First the downs, in this economic environment, the agency must focus on adult instruction and make sure programs are meeting promised goals and outcomes. By the end of this fiscal year, The Literacy Alliance will end its family literacy site at Adams Elementary and the Read to Me Programs. Though both run well, their development over the years has brought some mission drift.

Adams had widened its intake to include participants with children of all ages, a shift from family literacy's focus on parents of preschool age children. Our main partner at the Adams site, FWCS, was involved with the decision to close it and continues to be a strong partner in other Literacy Alliance programs.

Read to Me directed agency resources towards buying and managing children's books. Since we don't want to see Read to Me end, we're talking to literacy organizations that serve children. We hope they'll be able to adopt some of Read to Me.

As for the ups, changes we've made to the intake process and service delivery have gone well. Waiting lists have been reduced and put us in good shape for the increasing number of GED® students. We're able to identify student needs and direct them to services more efficiently.

In this issue of *Literacy News*, you've read about student successes. Our new neighbors from Burma are receiving rudimentary English and basic life skills at the St. Henry site. In 2008, Literacy Alliance students tied the agency's record for total GED®'s earned in one year, 75. The graduation event was well attended, and I'm still hearing good things from those who were there. Our new learning center in the WorkOne offices continues to be full, serving adult basic education students, many studying to take the GED® Tests.



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