

Laurens County Literacy Council Serving, teaching adults in need

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By Bristol Marchant

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(Ninth in a series about United Way-funded agencies in Laurens County.)

It may sound hard to believe, but there are actually adults in the United States who never learned to read, or are at best functionally illiterate. Despite the quality and availability of public education in America, a literacy problem persists.

This problem is being tackled locally by the Laurens County Literacy Council.

The organization helps adults in the Laurens County area learn applicable skills, such as reading, writing, basic math and computer skills, financial literacy, and health literacy, according to Executive Director Theresa Brewton.

Brewton said funding from the United Way of Laurens County is vital to the Literacy Council's operations. "We get about 15 to 20 percent of our funding from United Way," she said. "And many of our community volunteers and students learn about us through the United Way."



Skills: The Laurens County Literacy Council holds classes to teach reading and other fundamental skills to adults. It receives around \$20,000 from the United Way of Laurens County.

The United Way was crucial in paying for an on-site lab for literacy students and volunteers to get hands-on experience with computers. That money also goes toward paying staff and maintenance. This year the Literacy Council will receive \$20,000 from United Way.

"When you work with United Way, other organizations look at you as involved in and supported by the community, so that

helps get support from them as well," said Brewton. "This year we got a grant from the South Carolina legislature that United Way worked for, and their support helped our leverage to get the grant."

Harold Bittinger is a retired teacher who volunteers with the Literacy Council as a tutor. "I've been interested in literacy for a

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long time. When I was teaching at Erskine College I worked with the Anderson Literacy Council, and when I moved to Laurens County, I got involved with the council here," he said. "It's very worthwhile."

Bittinger is passionate about fighting the problem of illiteracy. "It's a subject that needs more attention. Illiteracy is a very broad problem in society. I believe it is of the utmost importance to the community and to the world at large."

Bittinger feels he's gotten as much out of his tutoring as his students have. "I'm fortunate that I get to do this. I get a real kick out of it," he said. "(The students) come in with a mixed bag of abilities, but they're always eager to learn... They have various levels of education. Most of them do well with very little language or writing skills, but somehow they get by."

Edna Guthrie, Bittinger's wife, also volunteers at the Literacy lab. "I work there one day a week, on Wednesdays. My husband goes there every day they're open," she said. "It's so worthwhile, I think I get as much out of it as they do. They're very earnest about broadening their prospects."

United Way Executive Director Caroline Thomas believes the Literacy Council does crucial work. "The Literacy Council has been a partner for many, many years," she said. "We provide funding for both their liter-

acy and English-as-a-second-language program, both of which are very needed in Laurens County. They've done some great work with adult literacy." Thomas says education is one of the United Way's key areas of concern, and they want to be active with the Literacy Council in tackling literacy issues. "The beauty of the program is that it brings education into full focus," Thomas said. "Education is one of the areas we try to focus on. So often people think education stops when someone leaves school, and that's certainly not the case."

Not only does the Literacy Council provide help for those battling illiteracy, but just as important in Thomas's estimation is the role the organization fills teaching English as a second language.

"The Literacy Council offers a solution on the need for many people to learn to read or learn English for the first time for those who are not just new to Laurens County, but new to the United States," she said. "It's great that we can offer a program to assist people in gaining new skills. With the complexity of the job market today it's important that people have somewhere that will help them with the skills they need."

With the help of the United Way, the Laurens County Literacy Council is doing its best to battle social problems at their most basic level. Bittinger might sum up their mission statement best when he says: "Anything you can do to help is worthwhile."

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