

Reading *Lights*

Georgia communities brighten lives through literacy

As Gail Walker says, "Second chances come rarely. So you'd better reach out and take that chance you're offered." Walker should know. At age 50, she found herself laid off from a job she'd held for 15 years.

The job market in Gordon County didn't exactly embrace applicants without GEDs. So Walker seized an opportunity, earned her GED, and garnered a number of community accolades including the 2002 EAGLE GED Student of the Year. Now, she offers words of encouragement and hope for the students she advises in her new job at Coosa Valley Technical College.

A bit like Walker herself, Georgia got a rude awakening following the 1990 Census. Nationally, one in five people read below the fifth-grade level. For Georgia, that number was one in four. That was enough to get the wheels turning for Dr. Ken Breeden, DTAE commissioner.

Breeden and the DTAE set out to help Georgia improve its literacy rates. He spearheaded the Certified Literate Community Program (CLCP),



Gail Walker was recently awarded the 2002 EAGLE GED Student of the Year.

which provides a blueprint for communities to use in setting up effective literacy programs.

"Dr. Breeden always says, 'CLCP is not about teaching people to read and write. It's about changing the culture of a community,'" says Billie Izard, CLCP's executive director.

The 10-year CLCP certification process requires that communities be certified twice: first when they make a commitment to serve their target population, and again when the 10 years are over and they've reached the necessary numbers and sustained adequate funding. For CLCP purposes, target populations include every person in a community age 16 and older who lacks a high school diploma or GED.

Today, the CLCP program boasts 51 communities in active participation. The following five have completed the 10-year process and are bona fide Certified Literate Communities.



MUSCOGEE COUNTY

CERTIFIED APRIL 6, 2000

Muscogee County, home turf of Columbus, Ga., holds the distinction of being the first Certified Literate Community in Georgia.

“Columbus is known for pulling the private and public sectors together to work on a common cause,” says Brenda Sybrant, executive director of the community’s Certified Literate Community Program. “And that’s something that benefited us as we were developing our goals and objectives.”

Because of its large population of 180,000, the county needed to reach considerable numbers. “We were taxed with serving 18,402,” Sybrant says. “But we overachieved and served more than 21,000, and we were very proud of that.”

Sybrant says the biggest reward of achieving certification is the way the program has directed people’s attention to literacy. “Our program focused not only on the basic reading and writing,” she explains. “It focused on workplace literacy. And it focused on encouraging community members to become ambassadors.”

Muscogee County’s CLCP is currently taking on even more literacy-related causes. One such program is called Columbus Reads. “Our programs now cover literacy needs from birth to old age,” Sybrant says.



WASHINGTON COUNTY

CERTIFIED JUNE 7, 2001

Christy Shurling, director of the Washington County Alliance for Literacy, came on board with the community’s literacy program a year after it got under way, and stayed for the duration.

“The community really got behind our program and understood our target,” she says. “They financed us and helped us get through the 10 years. We truly are small-town Georgia. And if we can do it, anyone can.”

In its 10-year quest to achieve CLCP status, the Washington County alliance reached approximately 2,140 people. The central Georgia county

has a population of about 20,000.

Washington County had no services exclusively for adult literacy, so the community and the kaolin industry showed an early interest. “All of those [kaolin] companies jumped on the bandwagon,” Shurling recalls. “They financed us and



Gloria Barnes (left) with Sandersville Tech Adult Literacy instructor Rhonda Knight

let us go in and teach their employees. That was a big boost to our numbers.”

The county’s CLCP proved invaluable to

Sandersville resident Gloria Barnes. Married nearly 16 years, Barnes regretted that she had never completed formal education. “You lose out on a lot when you quit school at an early age,” she says. “It’s vital to my family for me to be educated. I’d like to participate in my son’s education, and my being more educated will help him.”

Barnes says the teachers at Sandersville Tech made her feel comfortable and helped her succeed. “When you have teachers who are willing to sit down and make sure you get it, who talk to you like a human being, not a robot, it helps you go a long way,” she says.

It’s Barnes’ kind of enthusiasm that keeps Sandersville’s literacy program on the move. “Now that we’ve reached the goal of certification, we’re going to focus on advocacy and developing an advertising campaign,” Shurling says. “Hopefully, we’ll bring even more students to the technical college.”

Criteria for Participation in CLCP

1. A community group must establish plans and objectives dedicated to the accomplishment of the mission and goals of the Certified Literate Community Program.

2. A diverse representation of the community must be actively involved in the Certified Literate Community Program organization.

3. Boundaries of the community must be specified for the purpose of the program.

4. Census data should be consulted to determine the number of adults targeted for participation in the program. An analysis should be conducted to define the literacy needs to be addressed in the recruiting plan.

5. Plans for achieving these goals should be established so that the community can attain literate status within 10 years.

6. A method will be established for evaluating the progress toward the program’s goals.

7. The Certified Literate Community Program concept needs the written endorsement of all relevant governing bodies, such as Boards of Education and Chambers of Commerce.

8. A budget plan for three years must be developed, with sufficient funds and resources committed to accommodate the program for the first year, including the support of a full- or half-time community program administrator.



ELBERT COUNTY

CERTIFIED OCT. 4, 2001

ECCEL, an acronym for the Elbert County Council for Effective Literacy, is located in the granite capital of the world, Elberton, Ga. The program serves the county of nearly 20,000.

Teresa Harrison, chair of the board of directors for ECCEL, says some of the Council’s services are provided through Athens Technical College, where she is director of student services. “We not only provide office space for the executive director, but we also have the adult learning center here,” she says.

ECCEL casts a wide net in its literacy efforts.

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One of its centers — it has several besides the Athens Tech site — works with the mentally disabled. It also targets another special group: people in the local jail. “[Program teachers] go in and help any of the inmates who want to learn to read,” Harrison says.

One Elbert County literacy program participant, 20-year-old Holly Johnson, says the county’s services have made a world of difference for her. “They helped me a lot. And after I received my GED, I decided I wanted to further my education,” she adds.

Johnson, a wife and mother, is now enrolled at Athens Tech where she’s earning her LPN degree. After that, she plans to work toward her RN degree.

Harrison and her team plan to continue their efforts until the community’s entire target population has been served. “We’re determined not to stop,” she says. “We hit our halfway mark to get our certification, so that means we still have halfway to go.”



GORDON COUNTY

CERTIFIED NOV. 1, 2001

Just 15 minutes north of Dalton, Ga., the Calhoun/Gordon Council for a Literate Community reached approximately 4,500 citizens in need of literacy services to attain its certification numbers.

The goal was realized under husband-and-wife team Kyle and Vivian Smith, who served as joint program directors for the entire 10 years.

Kyle Smith says the Calhoun/Gordon Council relied heavily on public relations efforts to reach its certification numbers. The group used radio, local cable, and its presence at every community function — from fairs to rodeos, ballgames to PTA open houses — to raise awareness.

Overall, the program touched more than 7,000 people during the 10-year period, including Hispanic, Japanese and Russian populations in the area.

Smith notes that the biggest reason for his community’s success was an active board. “We had committees of dedicated people from all walks of life who really wanted this to work,” he says.

The literacy council strove to remove any barriers that might keep people from attending classes. “We provided transportation as well as childcare, and we paid for childcare if that was a problem,” he says.

The council also devised a funding solution early on: It became a United Way agency, which allowed it to be reviewed annually for funding. In return, the

Smiths and other committee members spoke on behalf of the United Way, making various presentations to business and industry.

Community involvement remains a central goal. Last fall, residents were encouraged to read Terry Kay’s *To Dance with the White Dog*, and Kay subsequently visited the community for a book discussion. For the future, Gordon County’s literacy efforts will continue full-steam ahead under its new director, Wayne Minshe.



KEYSVILLE, BURKE COUNTY

CERTIFIED SEPT. 5, 2002


Mayor Emma Gresham of Burke County’s Keysville, Ga., population 390, is a 77-year-old retired teacher. She is also a devoted advocate of education and an active participant in Visions of Literacy, a committee that grew out of the education concerns of a group called Keysville Concerned Citizens.

“When I first heard about the Certified Literate Community Program, I was so happy,” Gresham says. “It gave us the tools and all the necessary skills we needed to set up a program.”

Since the 1950s, Keysville has had no school in its city limits. “Without a school, many young people in the neighborhood didn’t have people looking over their education,” she says.

As a result, many residents lacked a high school education. And it was these people that Visions of Literacy strove to reach. Gresham recalls that one Keysville resident, an elderly gentleman now deceased, came to learn simply to sign his name and read from his hymnal.

The first time he went to a store after attending classes, the cashier told him just to sign an X. “And he said, ‘No, my teacher wants me to write my name.’ So he took his time and wrote his name. I was so proud when he came back and told me,” Gresham recalls.

Newly certified Keysville, armed with a host of willing community volunteers, will continue to stress the importance of education to its residents. “Because it all goes together,” Gresham says. “Good health and good education bring about a better community.” 



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EMMA GRESHAM, Mayor of Keysville