

The Learning Connection

YOUR IMPACT REPORT | WINTER 2022

Karolina enjoys a Wisconsin wonder



Karolina (red jacket) recently emigrated from Ukraine and now attends Group ESL class. Here is the letter she wrote to her teacher about a recent trip to explore a new place.

Hello, Ilana!

How are you? I'd like to tell you about my last trip. It was unforgettable. My friend and me decided to went to that place spontaneously. I'm talking about Devil's Lake state

park. We were in Madison on last Sunday, the ninth of October, with ours daughters. We were shopping with my girls... The weather was perfect—sunny and pretty warm. So we didn't want to waste this nice day and opportunity to visit a new place for us. So my friend suggested to go to the Devil's Lake. She said it was very beautiful place, one of the most beautiful she had ever seen. We went there by car. It took probably an hour and a half to get there from Madison. It was a really charming trip. We saw picturesque landscapes, trees colored in warm autumn colors, from green to purple. The road itself was charming with those trees on both sides. We arrived at Devil's Lake at 5 p.m. So there weren't a lot of people there. And we were very impressed of the beauty of that place. You know, I always take a lot of pictures. So I did it again... We were very happy. We walked a lot and enjoyed every moment there. Especially the sunset was adorable! We had a really great time. We hope to come there again and try hiking.

Hope you are well too. How did you spend your weekend?

Your friend, Karolina ■

Congratulations, Nessreen!

Hard work, persistence, and dedication pay off! Congrats to Nessreen, who completed her Esthetics Program at Academy of Beauty Professionals, and recently accepted a full-time job as an Esthetician!

Nessreen has been working with her tutor, Janet, to practice new vocabulary and learn new study skills. She said, "Janet taught me how to study and explained words in a way that I could understand them."

Nessreen originally connected with Literacy Network in 2004 when she moved to the US from Syria. She worked one-on-one with a personal tutor and took ESL classes at both Literacy Network and Madison College.



Nessreen holds her certification!

"I feel like it's kind of like a springboard"

MARIO GARCIA'S LITERACY NETWORK STORY

Mario Garcia met with board member Gabrielle Kelenyi to share his Literacy Network (LN) experience. Upon arriving from Guatemala City in 2003, Mario took English classes and worked with a tutor to reach his goals to feel confident in his English abilities and integrated into the community. He is proud of the "great resource to a lot of people" Literacy Network is, and grateful to the organization's supporters. The interview below, lightly edited for concision, contains more of Mario's story.

What did you like about your teacher and tutor at LN?

Mario: Everyone at Literacy Network was always friendly. This is almost 20 years ago, but you just never knew the sentiment of welcome you'd feel as an immigrant here. But they made me feel that I was welcome and there was a place for me in this community. Everyone was always willing to help out and provide resources. The teachers were pretty great. And my tutor, she was also really nice. She would take the time to really listen to what my goals were so she could help me to accomplish them. And we had a good understanding of what the relationship and the expectations were for each other. She was not shy about holding me accountable, but she would do it in a way that really motivated me.

How would you say LN has helped you improve your English and your life in general?

Mario: I feel like it's kind of like a springboard because I came here with very little relationships. So, I felt that they helped me not only with the English aspects, but also just providing a community of learners. Plus, I can hear the stories of other people: where they were coming from, what their goals were. And no longer I felt that I was alone in this journey, that there were some people on the journey as well. And maybe some of them were more advanced, and they serve as an inspiration.

What have you been up to since studying with LN? Where did it spring you towards?

Mario: I finished my degree at UW-Madison. I got involved with organizations like Voces de la Frontera and Centro Hispano and really tried to push for an



MARIO



GABBI

agenda that was pro-immigrant and pro-workers. And that led me to some visits in Washington DC with some congresspeople. That also led me to learn more about the state's economy and the contributions that immigrants make to this country and be able to communicate that, which eventually helped me work at Centro Hispano with youth. And after four years, I left to work for MGE, and I've been there for the last 10 years of my life. So I started there helping the company build and maintain relationships with community organizations like Literacy Network and Centro Hispano but also creating new systems for people who prefer other languages than English. And then about four months ago, my director retired, so I became the director of a small team. We are like a bridge between our customers and the community, providing information and knowledge but also bringing back some of the knowledge that we learn out there so that we improve.

So, what's next?

Mario: Working for a utility company, learning about that industry and the terminology, there was a learning curve there. So now, it's to keep learning about all of that in the context of climate change, technology, clean energy, and communicating that in ways that resonate with people. That's been my journey with MGE, to learn about it and then communicating about it. I envision staying in this community longer and advance some of the company's goals that we have for clean energy and making sure that everyone has access to those programs as well. ■

A volunteer's reflections

SARA WILLIAMS, CITIZENSHIP TUTOR

I stumbled into tutoring for citizenship in 2010 when a friend's husband, Rene, asked me to practice English with him in preparation for his citizenship interview.

Not long after Rene got citizenship, I saw that Literacy Network was holding a class for prospective citizenship tutors and signed up. The class gave me skills and materials that I lacked as well as a connection with the organization going forward. I began tutoring one on one and continued to the present day. This summer, I realized with some sadness that it's time for me to discontinue...

I've always been aware that tutoring has given me much more than it's taken. I've had the privilege of meeting unforgettable people whose life stories stay with me. Each person has made my world a little larger, particularly during the pandemic I felt so isolated but shifted to tutoring via Zoom. **I've often walked out of the Literacy Network or a public library after a tutoring session thinking, "I am so lucky to have met this person."** Sometimes this was a one-time encounter for a final practice interview and sometimes the tutoring took place over a year or more because the student had particular barriers. I always ask each person to do two things for me, to call when they leave the immigration office in Milwaukee and to vote in the next election.

Following up on the importance of voting... I've contacted former students, taken them to register to vote and occasionally accompanied them to the polls on the day they first vote. Once I drove to Marshall to help a former student register and go to the clerk's office for early voting. I got a sense of how intimidating this was when the clerk (very helpful and welcoming) began to ask him questions. He panicked, forgot his English, looked at me

for translation help and then relaxed enough to answer her questions.

He disappeared into the voting room for a long time considering his choices. I drove away from Marshall on a sunny fall day aware of what a gift it was to have witnessed his journey.

Another reason tutoring has been important to me is because **I feel passionately about the reasons people immigrate, the struggle they face and the insecurity of living in the United States without citizenship.** Many of the people I've met are working more than one job, attending classes at the Literacy Network and meeting for tutoring on top of all that. The past years have been hard ones as the national news has been permeated with racism and anti-immigrant sentiment... I've found tutoring to be a practical way to respond without wasting time and energy on anger.

Sometimes I've been caught up by the idea that I should be doing more. Then I remind myself that **while what I'm doing may seem small in the big scheme of things, it's not small for each individual who achieves citizenship.** I have so many wonderful memories of people who've shared their stories with me as they've practiced writing "The flag is red, white and blue" or memorized presidents, wars, and documents.

I want to thank the dedicated staff at the Literacy Network who have provided the structure and support for me to do this work.



Pete Lundberg, volunteer and donor, with Jeff Burkhart

"I love supporting Literacy Network because it's a local non-profit that helps so many learners and their families improve their lives, better connect with their community, and enhance our economy to make Dane County a much better place to live. The dedicated staff and volunteer tutors work with enthusiastic learners to create magic, and the positive results are undeniable. Literacy Network is a community jewel and deserves our support."



"Literacy has meant so much to me throughout my life."

Dear Friends,

As my last day of employment approaches, I am reflecting on all that makes Literacy Network a special place. The focus on students' hopes, dreams, goals, and achievements, the dedication to creating community connections, and the commitment to responding to students' needs are a big part of it.

But there's something intangible—the students, staff, interns, and volunteers make Literacy Network a vibrant place filled with kindness and encouragement to grow and learn. Every day a little something new gets added to it because of the positive energy people bring to it.

Thank you for the support you've provided to Literacy Network in the 14+ years I've been in my role as the executive director. Our students, volunteers, staff, and donors have been on a journey together, and I feel fortunate to have been a part of it. You make a difference in the lives of our students. And those of us who have worked with students know that we're also learning from them every day.

Literacy has meant so much to me throughout my life. As a young reader, I discovered how reading is key to understanding the others' perspectives and to living a rich life. As I became an adult, I realized I had opportunities that many others didn't. Volunteering as an adult literacy tutor helped me to put my values into action and to be part of an important movement to help adults better support themselves and their families.

I am grateful for the opportunity Literacy Network gave me. While I'm leaving my job, I won't be leaving this work. I'll continue supporting Literacy Network and am happy to help in whatever way I can. And I'll be rooting for the continued growth and vibrancy of its work.

Thank you for being on this journey with us.

Sincerely,

Jeff



"...the students, staff, interns, and volunteers make Literacy Network a vibrant place filled with kindness and encouragement to grow and learn."



Supporters raise \$40,000+ for free adult literacy education

More than 130 guests came together to celebrate student success at our first in-person Growing Through Literacy fundraiser since 2019. Thank you to everyone who helped make this special luncheon possible!

During the hour-long program, we were proud to introduce guests to students who are working toward their goals of continuing education, citizenship, new career opportunities, and more through improved literacy. Among their inspiring messages, they shared:

"As a student, it's an easy way to learn. It wakes up my brain so I can remember more." – Bertha

"I'm getting my words right again." – Buddy

"I'm also an interpreter so this benefit isn't just for me, it's for my friends too." – Gloria

"What I've loved about all my classes I've attended is the cultural and ethnic diversity." – Hussein

"I feel more confident when socially talking to people so I can say now I feel good." – Solange

Special thanks also to supporters Jane Nemke and Rodrigo Valdivia, as well as volunteer tutor Luke, who shared their personal stories and experiences about the importance of adult literacy education in their lives.

With everyone's support, we raised more than \$40,000 to support free adult literacy education!

If you missed the September 27th event, you can still experience the program by watching the event video on Literacy Network's YouTube page: bit.ly/GTL22video.

Thank you to those who helped to make this event a success, including board member, Dulce Danel, who served as our event emcee; student, volunteer, and donor speakers; and our generous sponsors: Boardman Clark, EZ Office Products, Group Health Cooperative of South Central WI, TASC, Wisconsin Distributors, Woodman's, and Findorff. ■

2022's GROWING THROUGH *Literacy* — LUNCH



Speaker and supporter Jane Nemke with event emcee and Board Member Dulce Danel



Guests listen to student and new Literacy Network staff member Hussein Alshammari



Instructor Ruth Roberts congratulates citizenship student and event speaker Bertha



MISSION:

*Literacy Network
helps adults in Dane
County build skills,
reach goals, and
connect communities.*

Literacy Network receives Library of Congress Award

Literacy Network is honored to announce that it has been named a Library of Congress Successful Practices Honoree. **Only 14 other organizations worldwide received a Library of Congress Literacy Award in 2022.**

The Literacy Awards Program, originated by David M. Rubenstein, philanthropist, honors organizations that provide exemplary, innovative, and replicable strategies to support literacy development. Since its inception in 2013, the program has awarded more than \$3 million to over 150 institutions working in 38 countries.

“Literacy means you can absorb information yourself and make your own decision, and that is freedom,” said Librarian of Congress Carla Hayden. “Through the generosity of David M. Rubenstein, the Library of Congress is proud to honor and celebrate the achievements of these extraordinary organizations in

their efforts to advance literacy across the globe.”

Literacy Network’s award recognizes the nonprofit’s achievements in the promotion of literacy, in particular its wraparound student support through our Student Services department.

“Persistence and resource support from Student Services staff enables students to stay in their program and improve their skills for a bright future,” said Executive Director Jeff Burkhart. “Improved skills mean greater financial stability, better communication with the healthcare system, greater engagement with their child’s school, and more. We are honored to be recognized for this work in helping students and are impressed by their commitment, drive, and perseverance.” ■

