

The Learning Connection

YOUR IMPACT REPORT | WINTER 2023

My journey into English

Amelia is a student in our Essential Literacy Tutoring Program. Here, she shares her experience learning English.

Amelia's story is lightly edited for length. Read the full story at litnetwork.org/amelias-story.



Amelia with her tutor, Dan.

My name is Amelia. I have been married to my husband, Juan Carlos, for ten years. We have been together for twenty years and we have four kids. I am from Mexico. I did not have the opportunity to study beyond the sixth grade because I have 13 siblings and it was difficult for all of us to continue to study. I was fourteen when I started to work to help my parents financially. I worked until I was twenty years old. I met my husband two years later. He decided to come to the United States. Two years passed. I decided to come to be with him.

When I arrived in this country, the first obstacle I faced was the language. I did not understand anything when people spoke. It was a very difficult time because I arrived in North Dakota where hardly anyone spoke Spanish. I did not know how to communicate with people. Although times were hard, we stayed there for

six months. Then we decided to move to Minneapolis. In 2004, we decided to come to Madison even though we did not know anyone there.

When we got here, we felt more comfortable and we began to interact with more people. We needed to look for a clinic because at that time I was pregnant with my first child. We found a clinic and I had my first appointment there. When we were there, we saw a bulletin board on the wall with information about some English programs. One of them was 'Literacy Community' [at Literacy Network]. **I remember the classes were amazing, the teachers always supporting me and having a lot of patience with me to achieve my goals.** That's when my Journey in English began.

I stopped attending Literacy class because I began to work. I felt confident with my English. About five years passed and I came back again to take more classes and then they gave me a tutor. That was wonderful because I practiced speaking more. I had a personal tutor for about a year. Since then, I have not been in any class because I was working and I also had two more children. It was a little difficult for me, but here I am again on my journey with English. Now, with more confidence. Thanks for all the support from literacy tutors and my family who are always supporting me. **I always say whoever wants, can, because in this country there are many opportunities to learn the language and more!!** ■

Our Essential Literacy Tutoring Program has expanded! We are pleased to now offer in-person Essential Literacy Tutoring on the north and east sides of Madison, where demand has been particularly strong. Essential Literacy is also offered at the Literacy Network office on Madison's south side. Students in this free individual tutoring program are both native English speakers and high-level English Language Learners. Following personalized lesson plans, students work one-on-one with a tutor on building essential skills in reading, writing, basic computers, or math. With these skills, students increase their employment opportunities, prepare for further education, help their children, and achieve personal growth.

"Everything is smiling if you try your best."

Phuong studied with Literacy Network from 2010-2012 and from 2014-2015. In addition to taking group classes, Phuong worked with personal tutor Debbie Lloyd. Here, we catch up with both Phuong and Debbie.

PHUONG

Where are you originally from?

I came from Vietnam in December 2009.

What did you like about Literacy Network?

Literacy Network is a very good and friendly place to help everyone learn a second language.

How did it help you to improve your English and life in general?

I took classes for living, health at Literacy Network to improve English and helped for my new life in US.

What have you been doing since you stopped studying with Literacy Network? What plans do you have for the future?

My sisters and I started our bakery, and my husband also helped, we worked together. The name "Two Sisters Bakery" are 2 sisters contributed together. This is my job from Vietnam I taught at schools, my home school, I wrote the book for school, couldn't count how many students I trained. I love students, schools, and I worked my bakery with my heart and my mind. Working hard to see the beautiful cake to serve my customers.

Also, I was a volunteer and the substitute teacher at Toki Middle School and Oregon School District.

Is there anything else you'd like to share?

I do not know more English so that I can share something with students. **Everything is smiling if you try your best.**



DEBBIE

I have many, many memories of working with Phuong. She was incredibly motivated and worked so hard during every lesson.

We are both former schoolteachers and school administrators. During our time together she shared her very successful experiences as a teacher and school administrator in Vietnam. Her students loved her. She also wrote a curriculum text that was used extensively in Vietnam. We worked to officially translate and process her credentials with the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. She did apply for teacher aide positions and was on the substitute teacher list. [...] Her reading skills in English were excellent. She had had many English classes in Vietnam. However, she found communication difficult when it came to pronunciation and verbal skills. She often complained that in Vietnam they had taught her the "wrong" English.

One of her primary goals was to get her driver's license. She knew how to drive and had driven a motorbike in Vietnam. Because the test was a written test, she didn't have trouble with the test. However, it was on a computer screen and that did offer some challenges. She quickly learned the content and soon had her learner's permit. Again, there were many cultural differences when it came to driving. Although the traffic is dense in Vietnam, it is also much slower. She and I drove together several times so that she could practice her skills. For her driving test, we initially went to the DMV in Madison. However, after a couple of unsuccessful attempts, we decided to go to Baraboo where she passed with flying colors.

These are just two memories that I have of working with Phuong. **I admire her determination and hard work. I was so excited when she told me that she had started her own business.**

Our families became very close and I see her socially today. ■



Five years of “Transitions”

Growing up in Afghanistan, Ahmad says his family taught him, “education is the only tool one could change his life.” Because of this, when he arrived in the U.S. in early 2023, he enrolled in Literacy Network’s Transitions program, where he participated in writing workshops and worked on setting goals and creating a resume. This fall, he took the next step toward his dream career by enrolling in Madison College’s Certified Public Accountancy Program.



Motivated to fill a gap in services for advanced English students like Ahmad, five years ago, **Literacy Network set out to build a program to support high-level adult English language learners (ELLs) seeking to build skills to succeed at Madison College.** “Students told us they wanted to take the next step in their education or career, but we noticed some hesitation. Guided by their reflections, we focused a new class around academic skills and navigating secondary, post-secondary, and career programs,” recalls Caitlin Mackesey, Literacy Network’s Director of Program Impact.

In 2019, the Oscar Rennebohm Foundation provided funding to start the “Transitions” program and has supported the program ever since. Fast forward five years and **nearly 300 students have participated in Transitions.**

“Oscar Rennebohm Foundation invested in the Transitions program at Literacy Network to create an educational pathway to Madison College and then a career pathway into our community.”

— Jenni Jeffress, Oscar Rennebohm Foundation President

TRANSITIONS PROGRAM OVERVIEW:

- **A group class on academic reading and writing** with grammar practice, TED talks, class discussions, and debates. The class has grown from an initial group of seven enrolled students to 24 this semester.
- **Academic advising** to help participants identify strengths, set goals, evaluate progress, explore career and education options, transfer education credentials from home countries, and discuss financial aid.
- **Class visits** from Madison College advisors and worker certification programs such as those at Latino Academy and Centro Hispano.
- **In-class skill-building workshops** with the Madison College Writing Center and the UW-Madison Odyssey Project.
- **This fall, the group class moved from Literacy Network to a classroom at Madison College - Goodman South Campus** to immerse students in a college setting and facilitate easy access to college services.
- **Tutors embedded in Madison College’s high school equivalency diploma classes** to support ELLs seeking a high school diploma as a primary goal or as a step to higher education.



This spring, Literacy Network held its first in-person graduation ceremony for Transitions students, on Madison College’s campus. Here, Transitions Program Manager Cassie Pilarski (second from left) celebrates with a few graduating Transitions students.

Improving job opportunities has always been a top Literacy Network student goal. **With Transitions, Literacy Network helps better prepare students for their dream careers.**

- **Frandine** completed Centro Hispano’s Caminos CNA Program and is now working at Meriter Hospital.
- **Anabel** became a real estate agent and returned to the Transitions class to offer a homebuying seminar to current students.
- **Julio** earned an associate degree in accounting at Madison College and is now working toward his bachelor’s in accounting at Lakeland University.
- **Linah** (right) is working toward her high school equivalency degree at Madison College. ■



The Student Leadership Council is underway!



The inaugural Student Leadership Council!

Students are at the heart of everything at Literacy Network, and we are proud to now have another way for students to shape the organization: the Student Leadership Council (SLC).

The SLC held their first of monthly meetings on October 17th. The group is made up of 12 Literacy Network students, who were selected via an application process. Participating students are enrolled in a variety of programs and come from 10 different home countries spanning five continents!

During the SLC's first meeting, members got to know each other and learned about Literacy Network's structure as an organization. They then reviewed SLC responsibilities and goals, and voted on projects to prioritize. They also shared their thoughts on proposed new taglines for Literacy Network. **In future meetings, the SLC will work on creating an SLC mission statement, help with student registration, edit our annual student survey, identify community educational needs, and more. We can't wait to see everything this great group of motivated students accomplishes!**

Special thanks to the Trustage Foundation and Coalition on Adult Basic Education (COABE) for initial funding to support the SLC. ■

As a warmup activity, SLC members answered the question, "Why is Literacy Network important to you?" Here are some of their responses:

"Couldn't start college if it was not for LN!"

"LN is more than teaching English. I didn't know anyone here and I had no social life but now I have so many friends."

"I am more confident now."

"We can talk about our needs and feelings."

"Very kind people, great supporters of students."

"LN helps me not think about all the crazy stuff that happens at home."



Members vote on areas of focus.

GET INVOLVED! Help us do even more in 2024. Volunteer or donate. Visit litnetwork.org for more information.



Ernesto and Cathy:

Jewelry making, pozole, *The House on Mango Street*, and more!



Ernesto and Cathy met in Fall 2022, when Cathy was the intern leading Ernesto's Community Literacy class. They began working one-on-one as a tutoring pair in Summer 2023. During their sessions, Ernesto shared that he had been a jeweler in Mexico. Coincidentally, Cathy had a friend who had begun a jewelry class at Madison College, and asked if Ernesto wanted to visit. The two went together, and the instructor invited Ernesto to enroll. **Initially, Ernesto hesitated because class time conflicted with tutoring sessions. The pair switched to personal tutoring outside of class so Ernesto could still study as well as rekindle his love of jewelry making.** He is exploring the goal of eventually selling his jewelry. Ernesto and Cathy continue to meet to work on Ernesto's goals, and as friends; Cathy and her husband recently enjoyed some homemade pozole with Ernesto and his wife!

Below, Ernesto and Cathy share more about their time together:

ERNESTO

Where are you originally from?

I'm from Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico.

Why did you decide to take classes?

To speak with everybody and to get my life easier, especially work.

Why do you like it?

I like it because we're like friends, and I feel comfortable. I like how she tries to find a way that I understand better. Literacy Network is a great group, a great resource.

How has it helped you to improve your life?

It has helped a lot. Now I think I speak more English and learn more reading and writing. Now I can use more when I go to the store, to the clinic, at work.

What's next? What plans do you have for the future?

My plan is to speak fluently. **I'm an assistant supervisor so I try to learn more so I can maybe be a supervisor.** I've worked at UW for 9 years and worked up from custodian, then moved to floor tech, and then assistant supervisor.

CATHY

How long have you been involved with Literacy Network?

I've been a tutor since this summer, but I was an intern before for seven or eight years.

What do you like about tutoring with Literacy Network and the student with whom you work?

The resources of LN are so deep. When I was an intern, the library upstairs was just incredible and the staff is willing to help. I also learned from the tutors, because they come in with a wealth of knowledge also, sharing ideas of what works, what doesn't.

With Ernesto, there's never a question about if this is something he wants to learn, because he wants to learn everything. **It's very gratifying as a teacher to have a student who just wants to learn.** We're reading *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros. I found out last week that Ernesto found it online and he can listen to it being read as well as listening to it with me. That's the kind of initiative that he takes.

How has tutoring with Literacy Network impacted your life?

It enriches my life in ways I wouldn't have if I didn't interact with people from other cultures. I learn more from my students than I teach them.

Why is adult literacy important for our community?

Being able to read and write and speak comfortably is key to fitting in. People who come to this country and can't communicate really stay isolated. It's important to be able to be part of community. ■



MISSION:

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

CELEBRATING 2023'S GROWING THROUGH LITERACY LUNCH



Willa and Saulo were our first-ever student-tutor event emcees!

Thank you to everyone who helped make this year's Growing Through Literacy fundraiser a success! **More than 150 guests attended the September 26th event, which raised over \$40,000 to support students in our free programs.** During the event, we were proud to introduce you to students who are working toward their goals of continuing education, citizenship, new career opportunities, and more through improved literacy. If you missed the event, you can still experience the program by watching the event video on Literacy Network's YouTube page: bit.ly/GTL23video.



"My listening is improved a lot, so I start to join my kids' school being the volunteer."

— Weichen

"I want to continue with Literacy Network [...] to go to school at Madison College." — Alfredo

"They make us feel comfortable and like you belong here." — María

2024 IS LITERACY NETWORK'S 50TH ANNIVERSARY!

We plan to celebrate throughout the year. Watch for more information starting in January!