



# HITTING THE BOOKS

BY JENNY SANTOMAURO

*As a new school year begins and city illiteracy rates soar, embattled groups like Literacy Volunteers are needed more than ever.*

"None of us are born readers" is how Tootie, the "Tutor Chat" columnist character for Literacy Volunteers of Buffalo & Erie County newsletter, begins her column. Reading isn't something everyone can do. In fact, in Buffalo alone, 30 percent of the population is functionally illiterate. The defining characteristic of functional illiteracy is the inability to read above a fifth grade level. To give you a real-world idea, that's also the level at which most daily newspapers are written. That percentage also includes people who can't read or write at all.

It's been eleven years since the last national literacy study was conducted by the National Center for Educational Statistics, a part of the U.S. Education Department. In 1992, Erie County's illiteracy rate equaled the disgraceful national average of 20 percent. The City of Buffalo, however, ranked ten percentage points higher, revealing roughly 87,000 people (about 30 percent of the population) are functionally illiterate. This year, the International Survey of Adult Literacy chose Literacy Volunteers as one of 300 organizations to survey so that 1992's numbers can be updated. Literacy Volunteers (LV) is a local chapter of the national non-profit organization, Literacy Volunteers of America. If and when the recent survey is completed later this year, Buffalo and Erie County's numbers will hopefully show some improvement.

"Just in the past few years, I've seen an increase in people coming in to learn how to read," says Tracy Diina, the enthusiastic executive director at Literacy Volunteers in Buffalo. "More and more people are revealing to us that they are illiterate. The stigma is going away."

While Literacy Volunteers primarily caters to functionally illiterate adults, the problem with illiteracy in this region is evident in children and adolescents as well. Patty Duffy, the principal of four years at Catholic Central School in Buffalo and an educator in Buffalo schools for 20, sees illiteracy every day. Beyond all other factors, Duffy points to economics. It is, more often than not, funding that dictates the quality of education. As is obvious from a visit to Kenmore West or Williamsville East, more resources go into suburban schools than into inner city schools. And Duffy is acutely aware of this.

"Unless you're in the system, you'd think the kids are all getting the same education, but they're not. If you look at education in the suburbs compared to the education in Buffalo, there's a disparity—an economic disparity," Duffy says. "We have such an enormous illiteracy problem in Buffalo. That's where most of the illiteracy in the area is."

Illiteracy, poverty and crime are undeniably connected; according to the Federal poverty guideline, about 40 percent of

people with the lowest reading skills considered to be literate live in poverty. What's more, 76 percent of adults receiving public assistance and 60 percent of prison inmates are illiterate, according to Literacy Volunteers of America. And for every dollar spent by LV to teach an adult how to read (which could lead to better employment and therefore a better quality of life), the return to the overall economy is \$33, according to AT Kearny's 1999 Economic Impact Analysis. That makes illiteracy very expensive for taxpayers, and it proves that literacy is a good economic—as well as social—investment.

It's not just the school's responsibility. LV puts emphasis on parents reading to their children and making literacy a part of family life.

"A lot of kids in the city don't have access to literature at home," Duffy says. "And when I compare some children at my school to my nieces and nephews who go to school in the suburbs, the kids in the suburbs are light years ahead."

Along with parental involvement, the difference, according to Duffy, is that a greater number of suburban schools have pre-kindergarten and kindergarten programs. Duffy is an advocate for pre-school programs, which many of Buffalo's schools don't have. Therefore, city kids get a late start with the alphabet and other basic skills that prepare children to become literate.

The fiscal crisis in Buffalo has made it virtually impossible to create pre-kindergarten and quality kindergarten programs. Head Start, which fills the void left by pre-kindergarten, came under attack in the House of Representatives this year, but strong public and governmental support blocked any threat to the program thus far. Head Start receives federal funding but operates on a local level. Locally, Buffalo Public School District's proposed budget for the next three years would have eliminated kindergarten altogether. The Control Board recently rejected that proposal, insisting the District find other corners to cut. Increasing class sizes—already pushing thirty students per class—could be a solution to the fiscal problem. However, it probably will not improve the quality of education, and it most likely will not reduce the illiteracy rate among children who might grow up to be illiterate adults.

To alleviate the adult illiteracy problem in Buffalo, Literacy Volunteers offers two programs, free of charge. One program, "Basic Reading," focuses on teaching functionally illiterate adults to read or improve their reading. Literacy Volunteers require a one-year commitment from students and tutors. In that year, the standard is to raise the student's reading and writing skills one grade level. Tracy Diina became a tutor in college, and she still tutors two students. She has tutored the same student, Morgan Coe, for eight years—an extraordinary amount of time—and they are currently reading their sixth book together. Coe had never read a book before going to Literacy

Volunteers. Now he is the author of the "Silver Fox" series, a serial spy story published in installments in the biannual *Student Link* newsletter, which publishes students' works.

Dick Thompson, a Literacy Volunteers tutor and retired insurance auditor, and Gaston Pantel, a Literacy Volunteers student and Haitian refugee who has been living in the States for 11 years, have been



above: Assemblymember Sam Hoyt, Literacy Volunteers tutor Dick Thompson and Skittles the Clown listen as LV student Gaston Pantel (foreground) tells his story of trying to overcome illiteracy.

photos courtesy of Literacy Volunteers

working together for the past year to improve Pantal's reading and writing skills. Pantal participates in Literacy Volunteer's second program, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). Pantal, who came to the United States speaking French Creole and Spanish, learned basic English and worked in manufacturing jobs until he was injured about seven years ago. Disabled and illiterate, Pantal came to Literacy Volunteers to learn how to read and write English. In the first year that Thompson and Pantal worked together, Thompson helped Pantal improve his reading and writing skills, raising them to the kindergarten/first grade level. The programs Literacy Volunteers offers obviously work; it's the lack of public funds allocated for such programs that paralyze these organizations. For example, New York State funding for Literacy Volunteers and programs like it has remained at a frozen number (about \$90,000 of Literacy Volunteers' annual budget of \$300,000) since 1988.

"The biggest problem is that no one seems to realize the need for funds. The county has cut funds considerably since I've been tutoring," says Thompson bluntly. "It's important to get this to the public and let them realize that they're paying for a lot of people who are on the dole who shouldn't be. If they were able to read and write, they'd be productive."

Literacy Volunteers has about four hundred volunteer tutors a year, and twice as many students. Tutors go through 18

hours of training in either the Basic Reading or ESOL program. The standard commitment for both tutor and student is one year. Recently, however, Literacy Volunteers is becoming more flexible in order to bring in more college students and young people as tutors. According to Diina, there are always at least one hundred students waiting to be matched with a tutor, and some tutors, such as Diina herself, take on more than one student at a time. The influx of students means that the word is getting out to people who need the services. Many may have slipped through the cracks at school or are new to English. It also means that the social problem of illiteracy is losing its stigma, which brings the problem that much closer to a solution.

"It's easy to be involved with Literacy Volunteers because literacy is such an important issue," Assemblymember Sam Hoyt says. "All of this talk of improving the local economy with high-tech initiatives is all for naught if we don't provide the most fundamental tools to our residents, and that includes the ability to read."

The Literacy Volunteers office in the Delaware Camera Plaza includes a library of books and learning materials geared toward adults; there's more literature on obtaining citizenship and getting a job than the kinds of stories you'd expect to see in lower grades. A large focus of the programs is helping the student become employable. New satellite sites on the East and West side have drop-in centers as well, where tutors and students can meet. Tutor orientation and student interviews, which assess a students' reading level and their goals—like reading to their children, or obtaining a driver's license or U.S. citizenship—take place at the Delaware Camera Plaza office. Just this past April, in conjunction with the Neighborhood Information Center, Fillmore-Leroy Area Residents, Inc. and Catholic Central School, Literacy Volunteers opened the Broadway-Fillmore Community Technology Collaborative. Last week, Literacy Volunteers hosted a local celebration of World Literacy Day at this site to raise awareness and funds. The new Collaborative sites are ideally located to serve the East Side community, which has both the highest illiteracy rate and the highest unemployment rate in the city. The Collaborative branches offer free literacy and computer skills workshops for children, adults and seniors.

"The fact that there's a literacy need in Buffalo is being seen and felt more and more," says Diina. "More people are beginning to realize that you're never going to get a strong, vibrant community with healthy neighborhoods if your people can't read enough to get a job or to read to their children."

For more information on becoming a volunteer, contact Literacy Volunteers at (716) 876-8991.