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SUMMER 2026

WORDS TO LIVE BY

The quarterly newsletter of the
Literacy Volunteers of the Montachusett Area

WHAT'S INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

- Celebrating the awesome LVMont Finalist for excellence award
- Finding a voice in English Bingo Night
- From the old days.

WORDS FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Zwanieke Visser

As we close another fiscal year, I want to thank everyone who makes our mission possible —our students, tutors, volunteers, donors, board members, and community partners. This year brought many reasons to celebrate. Our student, Fabienne Celestin, was recognized as the Massachusetts Coalition for Adult Education's Student of the Year and delivered a speech in English to hundreds of educators from across the Commonwealth. LVMont was honored to be selected as a finalist for the Massachusetts Nonprofit Excellence Award.

These achievements reflect the dedication, resilience, and generosity of our entire community. Every tutoring session, class, donation, and partnership helps create opportunities for adult learners to build skills, confidence, and brighter futures. Thank you for being part of this journey and for helping us transform lives through literacy. I wish you a wonderful summer!

Warmly,
Zwanieke

CELEBRATING THE AWESOME



Student of the Year Award

We are proud to share that our student, Fabienne Celestin, was honored with the Student of the Year Award by the Massachusetts Coalition for Adult Education (MCAE). The award was presented at the MCAE Conference, where Fabienne delivered a speech in English to an audience of approximately 600 adult educators and literacy professionals from across Massachusetts.

Fabienne's journey is a remarkable example of perseverance, determination, and the transformative power of education. After arriving in the United States from Haiti, she faced significant challenges, including cramped living conditions, limited financial resources, caring for a young child, and learning English as a new language. Despite these obstacles, she studied tirelessly, often late into the night, and successfully completed a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) program, passed her licensing exams in English, and secured full-time employment in healthcare.

Fabienne continues to study English while working toward her long-term goal of becoming a Registered Nurse. Her commitment to learning, supporting her family, and encouraging her fellow students makes her an inspiration to all of us. We are incredibly proud of her accomplishments and grateful to have her as part of the LVMont community.



LVMONT NAMED FINALIST FOR MASSACHUSETTS NONPROFIT EXCELLENCE AWARD

We are honored to share that Literacy Volunteers of the Montachusett Area was selected as a finalist for the Massachusetts Nonprofit Excellence Award in the Small Nonprofit category. This recognition reflects the dedication, passion, and hard work of our entire community. Every tutoring session, conversation circle, citizenship class, assessment, donation, partnership, and word of encouragement contributes to our mission of transforming lives through literacy. This achievement belongs to our incredible students, whose determination inspires us every day; our volunteer tutors and facilitators, who generously share their time and talents; our donors and funders, who make our programs possible; and our community partners, who help us extend our reach throughout the region. Thank you for believing in our mission and helping us create opportunities for adult learners to build confidence, achieve their goals, and strengthen our communities.

FINDING A VOICE IN ENGLISH: A JOURNEY OF CONFIDENCE AND COURAGE



“Participating in the Parent Child 25th anniversary celebration and giving a speech in English was one of the greatest achievements of my learning journey. I never imagined I would speak in public at an event.

I accepted this challenge to step out of my comfort zone and show my children that, with dedication and perseverance, we can overcome challenges and achieve what once seemed impossible.

It was emotional to express my gratitude in English for the positive impact the program has had on my son and our family. This experience strengthened my confidence and showed me that every effort to learn is

worthwhile.

I hope my story encourages other students to keep learning. Learning a new language takes patience and persistence, but every step brings us closer to new opportunities. Never be afraid to try. Sometimes, our greatest achievements begin with the simple decision to say “yes” to a challenge.” - student Sagra

BINGO NIGHT BRINGS FUN, COMMUNITY, AND SUPPORT

On June 3, Literacy Volunteers of the Montachusett Area hosted our second Bingo Fundraiser at the Thirsty Robot Brewery in Fitchburg. It was a wonderful evening filled with friendly competition, laughter, great prizes, and the opportunity to connect with supporters of adult literacy in our community.

Thank you to everyone who attended, donated prizes, volunteered, spread the word, or purchased raffle tickets. Together, we raised \$1,194 to support our free literacy and English language programs.

The funds raised will help us recruit, train, and support volunteer tutors and provide free educational opportunities to adults working to improve their literacy, English language skills, and citizenship knowledge. Every dollar helps transform lives through literacy.

We are grateful for your support and look forward to seeing you at a future event!



THANK
YOU!
♥



FROM THE OLD DAYS...



Staff photograph by John Shaw

DEFEATING ILLITERACY — John O'Brien of Leominster, who now reads at a fourth-grade level, labors over 'The Black Stallion' with tutor Kathleen Mahoney's help.

Now John can read, thanks to tutor's help

By John Shaw
LEOMINSTER BUREAU CHIEF

LEOMINSTER — Sitting at his kitchen table, John O'Brien slowly pronounces each word as he reads a page from "The Black Stallion."

O'Brien holds a bookmark beneath the line to keep his place as he reads. He labors over some words, sounding out the ones he can't immediately grasp.

Listening to him is Kathleen Mahoney. As O'Brien reads, Mahoney offers guidance, helping him go on to the next word, the next sentence, the next page.

"His deck crew ...," O'Brien says, starting a new sentence.

"It's not 'dock,' it's 'deck,'" Mahoney corrects softly.

"His deck crew ...," O'Brien continues.

Until three months ago, O'Brien could not have read a page of the Walter Farley novel. O'Brien is illiterate, the victim of an educational affliction that touches one in five adults in the

United States. But thanks to programs like the Literacy Volunteers of Massachusetts, and individuals like Mahoney, people like O'Brien are learning — albeit late — the joys of reading, be it a menu, a newspaper or a book.

"It's hard to draw a general profile of an illiterate individual," says Jean A. Coakley, director of the Massachusetts program. "There's such a wide range of abilities people come here with."

Many people who contact her program are foreign-born and need training in English as a second language. But in the North County, there are many more people like O'Brien, those who slipped through the cracks during their school years and cannot read.

More than 11,000 people in this region are functionally illiterate, Coakley said, meaning that they can "get by" in day-to-day matters but cannot truly read. More than 80 tutors like

Mahoney donate their time to help the O'Briens help themselves.

While these people cannot read, that doesn't mean they are not smart, Coakley added. Far from it. Imagine trying to get through every day, living in constant fear that someone will discover your secret, designing ways to get around having to read anything, and you'll find some pretty ingenious people.

O'Brien, a Leominster resident who works as an armed security guard, admits that he was not a great student as a youngster, and he fell behind in his studies in the first grade. Rather than giving him extra help or keeping him behind a year, the Roman Catholic school he attended passed him to the next grade, and the next. It was the same when he entered the public school system in the fifth grade, and O'Brien would never catch

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LITERACY VOLUNTEERS
of MASSACHUSETTS

Literacy Volunteers of the Montachusett
Area (LVMont) is an affiliate of Literacy
Volunteers of Massachusetts



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Fitchburg City Hall
Fitchburg Senior Center
Leominster Veteran's Memorial Center
Fitchburg Art Museum



*"We make a living by
what we get, but we
make a life by what
we give." – Winston
Churchill*

