

Northwoods

COMPLIMENTARY

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AND BEYOND

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TACKLING THE PROBLEM OF ILLITERACY

A conversation with
Literacy Task Force of
Northern Wisconsin
President Peggy Steber

*A PASSION
FOR POTTERY*

Rhineland artist Torrey Youngstrum

Bob and Peggy Steber have been involved with the Literacy Task Force since the organization was created.

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY TIMI ECKES



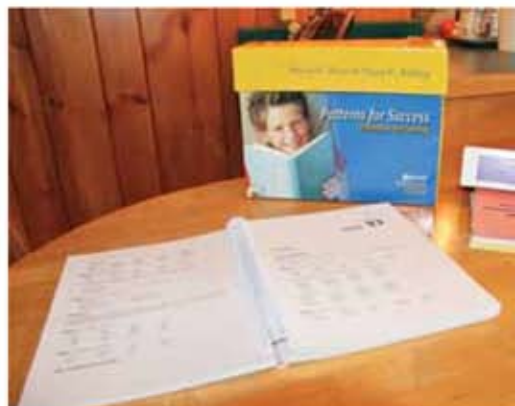
LIFTING UP THOSE WHO S

Literacy Task Force of Northern Wisconsin

For anyone who enjoys curling up with a book and getting lost in its pages, or keeping up with the latest news on their mobile device, it's hard to comprehend what life is like for the millions of people who can't experience the pleasure, intellectual growth and opportunity that reading brings because they are illiterate.

Literacy is generally thought of as the ability to read and write, but it also encompasses the ability to compute and solve problems well enough to function in society. An illiterate person may not be able to read a medicine

label, for example, or apply for a job, understand written job directions or accomplish many other tasks that most people take for granted. Along with the burden of hiding the inability to read, such a person may also live with



Those enrolled in the literacy training class purchase a kit that includes lesson plans, drill cards and more.

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

– Margaret Mead

low self-esteem and low wages.

In addition to making life hard for these individuals, illiteracy is a serious social problem. It impacts business productivity and profitability, health and crime rates. Worldwide, there are more than 796 million people who can’t read or write, according to an August 2015 report from the World Literacy Foundation. In the U.S. alone, Literacy Partners Inc. reports that the annual cost in lost worker productivity is \$80

and a ready smile, she seems to be a natural fit for an organization like the LTFNW. A former elementary school teacher, she later went into corrections, where she worked with students whose reading abilities were at sixth grade level or lower. Some of those students, she recalls, couldn’t read at all. Her husband, Bob, is a retired Nicolet College faculty member who worked with students with disabilities. In the course of his work, Bob says, he

became aware that in addition to younger students, there are also adults in the area who struggle with reading.

So when the couple learned that local educators Lee Ganschow and Nona Soroosh wanted to organize a group to take on the problem of illiteracy in the Northwoods, they jumped at the chance to get involved. In 2004, the small group founded the Literacy Task Force of Northern Wisconsin.

Since its creation, those involved with the Oneida County-based organization have been working to promote literacy in the region. They do this with the help of donations from generous benefactors and working in partnership with the American Association of University Women,

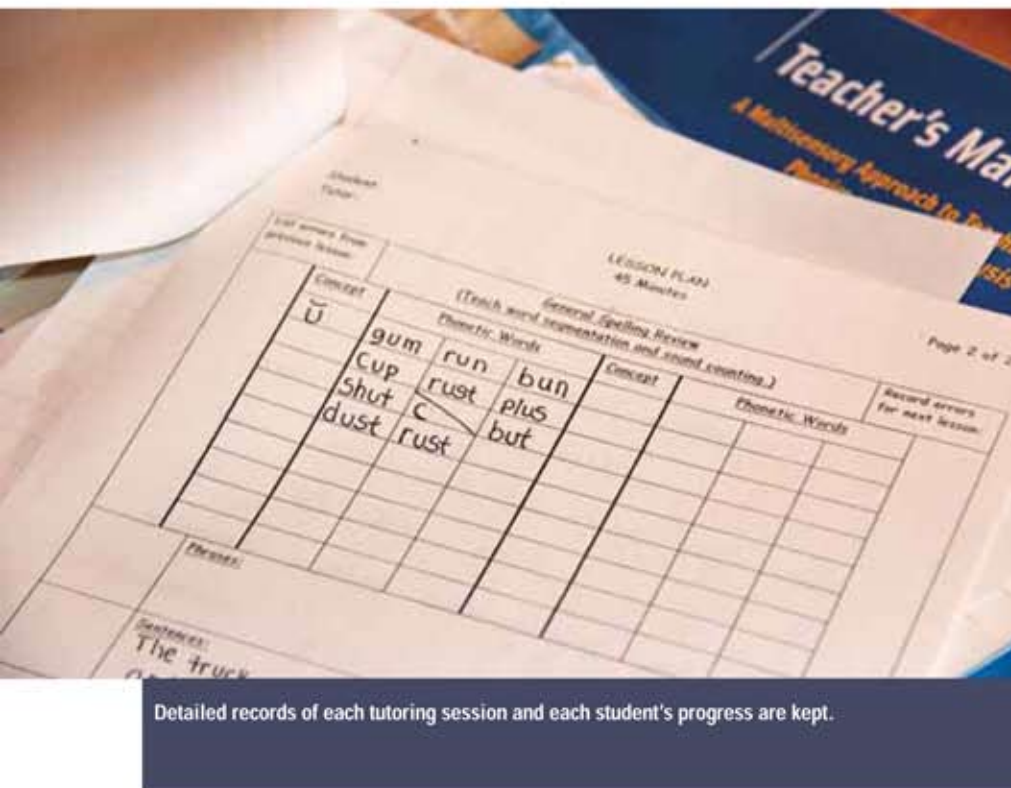
STRUGGLE WITH READING

billion and \$225 billion in unemployment benefits, lost taxes and crime. In addition, low health literacy – the ability to obtain and understand basic health information – costs \$106 to \$236 billion annually in this country.

Unfortunately, illiteracy is more common than many people realize, and it exists in northern Wisconsin.

That’s a problem a small group of people, including Peggy Steber, recognized years ago. Peggy is one of the founding members of the Literacy Task Force of Northern Wisconsin (LTFNW) and has served as its president for four years. With her background in education, a pleasant demeanor





Detailed records of each tutoring session and each student's progress are kept.

Nicolet College, the Wisconsin Branch of the International Dyslexia Association and Wisconsin Literacy Inc.

To help people overcome their struggles with reading, the LTFNW trains tutors every year. The next training session, a beginner level class, is slated for July 25 through 28 at Nicolet College in Rhinelander.

"For three years, we'll do the introductory class and then the fourth year we'll do the advanced," Peggy explains. Those participating in the classes pay a reduced fee, she says, as the task force covers part of the cost. On the first day of class, trainees purchase a kit that includes a manual with more than 100 lesson plans, drill cards, student word lists and activity books. During the course, they learn how to prepare lesson plans and

how to teach lessons.

While many of those who take the classes are educators, that isn't always the case, Peggy says. "We usually get a few grandparents who take it because they're interested in tutoring their grandchildren." And, she notes, some of those who take the course are struggling with reading themselves.

The teaching method used is one in which Peggy has great faith. "Our course is set up so that as soon as you finish, you can feel confident tutoring," she says.

Tutors may work with children or adults. Tutoring sessions last 45 minutes to an hour, depending on the age of the student, and detailed records of each session and each student's progress are kept.

Working toward any worthy goal can be fraught with chal-

lenges, and promoting literacy is no exception. Because of the rural nature of this area, Bob notes, lengthy commutes to and from LTFNW's literacy training workshop can discourage some who would otherwise be interested in learning how to tutor students; the long drives and inclement weather may also hamper efforts for tutors to meet with students.

The biggest challenge, however, is funding. It takes money to underwrite the literacy training sessions the group holds every year. "We want to make it affordable for people of all incomes," Peggy explains, adding, "It would be great if we could do two trainings a year."

The task force is entirely dependent on donations. "We're at a disadvantage because we're a small group of volunteers," Peggy says. "We're a viable group for helping others. We would gladly welcome donations, but also for people to join us."

The LTFNW may be a small organization, but between fund raising, giving presentations about literacy to various local groups, preparing for training sessions, matching up tutors with students and fine-tuning organizational structures, those involved stay busy. In 2015, as part of the community service project required for graduation from Leadership Oneida County, a group of leadership candidates assisted the LTFNW with implementing a "Books on the Bus" project and updating the organization's data base and website.

The LTFNW's work appears to be paying off in increased awareness of literacy's importance. So many people signed up for the 2015 workshop, Peggy says, that

some had to be put on a waiting list.

The small group who met more than a decade ago to tackle a serious social problem has come a long way. Since 2005, according to the LTFNW website, more than 100 people have been trained as tutors in the group's beginning level workshops, and 49 have taken advanced training. Over the years, those trained as tutors have worked with hundreds of students in classrooms or on an individual basis. There's no doubt that lives have been changed for the better because of the group's work.

While illiteracy can be a complex issue, there's nothing complicated about why Peggy Steber and others like her are involved with the Literacy Task Force of Northern Wisconsin. For her, the greatest reward, she says, is "Having an impact on people who struggle with teaching reading or learning to read."

For more information about the Literacy Task Force of Northern Wisconsin or the training course scheduled for July 25-28 at Nicolet College, visit literacytaskforce.org, or contact Peggy Steber at (715) 277-2019 or ste@newnorth.net.

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