

THE WRAP

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Literacy organization helps change lives, one word at a time

Literacy

By Gary Warnock

Volunteer Board Member,
People, Words & Change

Margaret MacDonald knows firsthand the damaging impact that low literacy has on people's lives.

"My father was illiterate all his life," she says. "He couldn't read, write, count currency or do simple math, and this had a devastating effect on our family's quality of life."

Margaret has seen this in her professional life as well; she is the communications director for the Ottawa Police Service.

"Low literacy can pose barriers to justice for victims, witnesses, complainants and even suspects," she says. "Low literacy can also interfere with understanding – if people don't understand the forms or documents they're dealing with when they're in the court system, then they're not served properly by the justice system."

"If you don't understand what your rights are, then you don't have them."

Enter People, Words & Change (PWC), an Ottawa, non-profit literacy organization that provides free one-on-one tutoring in basic reading, writing, math and computer skills for adults with training or employment goals or anyone



Tutor Margaret MacDonald and learner Rick working together at PWC

wanting to improve their basic quality of life.

Imagine not being able to read a bedtime story to your children, help them with their homework or write emails to your colleagues at work – or to your friends on Facebook.

Imagine that this has been Catherine's reality until now.

After three years with People, Words & Change, Catherine writes, adopting PWC's new motto "Now I can," with confidence. "I can write a letter to my kids' teachers. I can also write an accident report at work. At the grocery store, I can read the ingredients on the labels. At daycare, I can read better to the children. I am so proud of myself."

That pride leads to con-

fidence, which leads to a better life for the hundreds of people who have come through PWC's doors since it opened in 1983.

"We think that living in such a wealthy and successful city like Ottawa means we're immune to issues like low literacy," says Chris Girard, PWC's coordinator. "We look around us and think that everybody can read and write and count – if we think about it at all. But in fact, here in Canada – and here in Ottawa – our own family members, friends and colleagues face literacy challenges on a daily basis."

At least four out of 10 adult Canadians, aged 16 to 65, struggle with low literacy. That's about nine million people who have

less than high school level reading ability.

Chris says that volunteer tutors with People, Words & Change have been working one-on-one with Ottawa-area adults for more than 30 years and that she never ceases to be amazed by the progress people make and the confidence they gain.

"Before I started my English lesson, I couldn't write a report or letters without mistakes," says a PWC student. "Now I can write a report and letter without any grammar mistakes. This makes me feel good and confident. I will be able to write reports at work. This will help me to find new opportunities."

Last Sept. 8 – International Literacy Day – Peo-

ple, Words & Change held their first "Power of Words" Breakfast. Over 75 people attended and five PWC students went public, for the first time, and shared their stories.

Rick explained that he came to PWC over four years ago. His tutor, Margaret MacDonald, says he "was a very shy man with very low self-esteem. If you met him today, you might find that hard to believe."

"At first, he didn't want anyone to know that he was getting help with his reading and writing," says Margaret. "Now, he proudly shares it with all – his co-workers, his boss, his family. He has become much more confident, and has finished reading his sixth book. Over time, we have developed our own mutual style of tutoring – reading books together, comprehension questions and answers based on the book, spelling, grammar and vocabulary sessions."

Rick is learning computer skills and types out his homework every week. He uses the Internet for research, and sends emails daily. He is into computer games and even does his banking online.

"When you have a student who has struggled with something so limiting for so long, then you see the proverbial light come on, there's nothing more worthwhile," says Marga-

ret. "In addition, it's incredibly satisfying to watch them evolve and gain confidence to the point where they can even share their own success publicly."

Yet there are still many more people in the nation's capital who need the services that People, Words & Change can provide, whether it's to help them get jobs, improve in their current ones, or help with basic everyday life skills.

If you know someone who has literacy challenges, or even suspect they do, encourage them to call People, Words & Change. The organization is helping people build better lives – one word at a time. As Canadian writer Lawrence Hill wrote in *The Book of Negroes*:

Once I could manage "cat," "dog," "lion," "water," "father" and the like, I moved on quickly to new challenges... One day it was "The dog ate the cat." Then it was: "The cat ran from the barking dog." And then it was: "The barking dog chased the cat up the tree and the birds flew out of the nest." The language came together like pieces of a secret, and I wanted more of it every day.

You can call People, Words & Change at 613-234-2494, Monday to Thursday, 8:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. or email them at info@pwc-ottawa.ca. Check out their website at www.pwc-ottawa.ca.