

United Way funds help many learn to read

BY LYNNE BRANDON
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Part of a series on "Advancing the Common Good Through Transformed Lives," highlighting a United Way of Greater Greensboro supported program or partner agency. This week: Reading Connections.

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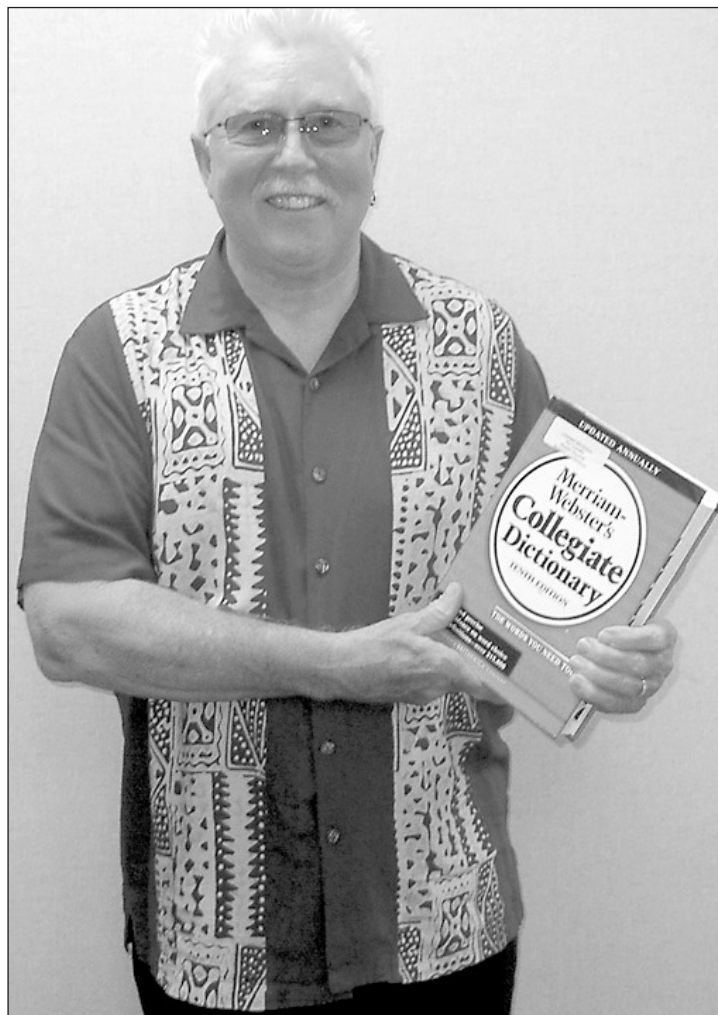
In Guilford County, 21 percent of adults, or 70,000 people, are unable to perform basic functions such as filling out a job application, following directions on a prescription for medication or reading a bill.

An additional 25 percent read at an insufficient level for today's fast-paced and technology-driven society.

Look further and you get the most startling adult literacy statistic: one out of every five adults in Guilford County reads at no higher than a third grade level.

Reading Connections, a United Way of Greater Greensboro partner agency, is meeting the increasing and crucial need for adult literacy by offering programs in adult basic education, computer literacy, workplace literacy, health literacy, GED preparation, English for Speakers of Other Languages and family literacy.

Success stories, such as Butch



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Reading Connections helped Butch Helms increase his reading skills.

Helms, make it all worthwhile, said Marcy Ray, Reading Connections' development and communications director. Like

many adults with low literacy, Butch's intelligence was one of several coping mechanisms that allowed him to hide a low level of

literacy.

When Helms lost his job in 2006 he realized that he could no longer hide his lack of literacy in a competitive work force.

"Pride had kept me from admitting I couldn't read well, but I knew I finally had to do something about it," he said.

Today Helms is a changed man who enjoys writing stories about his childhood and volunteering to read at his grandson's elementary school. He is a popular speaker at fundraisers and special events where his enthusiasm for reading and how it has changed his life inspires all who listen.

Thanks to United Way of Greater Greensboro funded literacy programs and others at Reading Connections, Helms has increased his reading literacy from a sixth grade level to an intermediate, or ninth to 10th grade, level. He continues to work with a tutor.

Reading a biography of J. Edgar Hoover is a major accomplishment for Helms, and he is reading other books that once would have been impossible. "Before, I could only scan the newspaper, but now I can read it cover to cover," he said, smiling. "Reading Connections taught me not only how to read better, but more importantly how to believe in myself."

The organization reports other client milestones are equally awe-inspiring, such as applying for citizenship, buying a first

home, receiving a GED certificate, enrolling in college or, as in one case, going from a dead-end job as a janitor to a career path as a nurse.

Ray noted that results of a changed life are rewarding, but much work remains to be done. For one, the organization has a waiting list of 50 to 100 clients who often wait months before they are assigned a tutor.

"A cultural shift needs to take place," Ray said. "A higher skilled job market and our low literacy rate, which is slightly worse than the national average, makes literacy a priority for our community. Low literacy is also intimately tied to poverty, crime, unemployment and drug use and an overall lesser quality of life." Ultimately, everyone has the right to read.

United Way's support of Reading Connections Adult Literacy Program enabled 100 percent of students in the program to seek jobs and re-enter the work force.

"United Way is a lifeline for Reading Connections," Ray said. "We count on this funding to meet literacy needs in our community. We would not exist without the support of United Way."

For information on United Way of Greater Greensboro, visit www.unitedwaygo.org. For information on United Way of Greater High Point, visit www.unitedwayhp.org

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