



**From: Kelli Williams, Chief Communications Officer
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Please consider additional reminders as events approach. (See below.)

The gift of language: Bartlesville Public Library offers literacy tutor training

“Literacy is the bridge from misery to hope.”

— Kofi Annan

Former United Nations Secretary-General and 2001 Nobel Peace Prize recipient

For Carol Smith, becoming a volunteer tutor for the Bartlesville Public Library’s Literacy Services was “a natural fit.” After retiring from the Bartlesville Public School District a few years ago, Smith joined the literacy program to help area residents improve their literacy skills or learn to speak English — and she wouldn’t trade the experience for anything, she says.

“I enjoyed teaching foreign language in the Bartlesville Public School system for thirty years and then English as a Second Language for the Adult Education Department of BPS,” Smith said. “Those were wonderful and fulfilling years. When I retired, it was a natural fit for me to volunteer as a tutor for the Bartlesville Public Library’s Literacy Services. Words can’t adequately express what a thrilling and rewarding experience that has been.”

The library’s Literacy Services will host the “Open Minds” workshop series — an event held over the course of three evenings in June — to train community members to become literacy tutors. The trainings will be held 6-9 p.m. on June 1, June 8 and June 15.

The free training is sponsored by the Oklahoma Department of Libraries. Introductory information will be provided and questions about the program will be answered at the beginning of the first session, on June 1.

“The Open Minds workshop teaches volunteers how to effectively help someone improve their literacy skills or learn to speak the English language,” said Literacy Services Director Karen Kerr-McGraw. “The training covers a variety of topics including

characteristics of adult learning, reading strategies, accommodations and selecting appropriate curriculum.”

Upon completion of the course, new tutors will be qualified to be matched with an adult learner on the waiting list. The tutor and learner will then meet for an hour or two each week at the library, Kerr-McGraw said.

While some volunteers have a background in education, a teaching degree or experience is not required — or even typical, says Kerr-McGraw.

“An adult literacy tutor is a person who wants to work with adults who have literacy difficulties or needs to learn our language — someone who likes to serve others and is comfortable with reading and writing,” Kerr-McGraw said “It is not necessary that you are a teacher or have a degree, or even have finished second level school. In addition, you do not need any particular experience, as you will be given full training.”

Smith’s experience with the program has primarily involved working with learners looking to improve their English skills — and have a little fun in the process, Smith says.

“My students so far have been Russian women who want to improve their English skills in all areas: speaking, reading, writing and comprehension,” she said. “By the way, I do not speak a word of Russian and it doesn't matter because their goal is to learn English. I have also taught Chinese and Vietnamese students and I don't speak those languages either.

“Teaching adults to speak your own language in a small group or one on one forms a friendship bond like no other. Phrases that come to mind to describe these students are ‘eager to learn,’ ‘grateful to have a free tutor’ and ‘hardworking.’ But most of all they are fun and full of good humor. I look forward to seeing the moment the student suddenly ‘gets’ the concept or the word or the idea she has been struggling with. We laugh together and play together.

“However, learning English is frustrating, difficult, challenging work. Success comes in small increments. And what enjoyment comes from celebrating those successes! But no matter how long or how short my experience has been with my students, they have each become a precious life-long friend.”

Tutor George Halkiades has an entirely different background but feels similarly about the program. He saw a need in the community and decided to do what he could to help.

“I have a degree in electrical engineering. I generally help with individuals who need help with mathematics, but I also help with reading and English as a Second Language,” he said.

“I started tutoring over ten years ago because I learned there was a shortage of individuals who were willing to help. I learned I could help without spending a lot of time — just one to two hours a week.”

Halkiades says watching participants overcome the obstacles that hold them back and achieve their goals is the best reward.

“A few years ago I was tutoring a gentleman from China who told me he would not answer the phone at home because he was embarrassed he could not speak English,” Halkiades said. “After we had worked together for a while he came to a session and announced, beaming with pride, that he had answered the phone. That is why I volunteer as a tutor.”

According to Kerr-McGraw, adequate reading skills are vital in today’s society, and too many Washington County adults lack the necessary skills.

“Adults with minimal reading abilities often find it difficult to find employment, follow directions on labels and forms, and even read to their children,” Kerry-McGraw said. “An estimated 13 percent of adults in Washington County have below basic literacy skills.”

The Literacy Services program is doing its part to lower that number. The program boasts a high rate of success — thanks to the volunteers who selflessly share their time and knowledge, Kerr-McGraw says.

“One of the reasons for the success of the local literacy program is its well trained and dedicated volunteer tutors,” Kerr-McGraw said. “Our tutors are really making a difference in the community. Literacy Services depends on caring individuals who are willing to spend time helping others improve their literacy skills.

“Our program provides free reading instruction and literacy skills to adults over the age of 16 who wish to improve their basic reading skills. English as a Second Language is also a highly utilized service that is offered. Right now we have a waiting list of adults who need tutors.

“Becoming a tutor will enable you to make a profound difference in a person’s life,” she said.

Smith encourages anyone interested to take the plunge and attend the trainings.

“I would encourage anyone who would like the joy of making someone's life a little easier to consider becoming a tutor for the Literacy Council,” Smith said. “The staff is incredible to work with and makes teaching fun, easy and rewarding.”

To register for the training, call 338-4179.

