

English Literacy Opens New Worlds

Ever wish you had a better job? Consider the career path of Dler Muhammed. He and his wife Bari are refugees from the carnage in Iraq. While living there, Dler helped the U.S. Armed forces as a minesweeper. His job was to find the notorious “improvised explosive devices” (IEDs) hidden along roadsides and let U.S. troops know so that they could be safely defused or detonated. Some job!



Teaming up to find IEDs. Photo: U.S. Army

After being granted permission to come here as refugees, the couple enrolled in Lincoln Literacy’s

classes. Both tested at very low levels of English when they started in March 2013, but Dler and Bari rocketed ahead. He took five different classes every week, and moved from Level 1 to Level 4 in just over a year – triple the predicted advance for an adult student.

Meantime, Dler got a job at Wal-Mart, and then after reaching Level 4, he was able to land a good job at the manufacturer Molex – also a supporter of Lincoln Literacy.

Bari’s no slouch. She went one better than See *New Worlds*, pg. 2



Closing the Circle: Newcomers Become Tutors

Lincoln Literacy’s volunteers are wonderful, caring people who give their time and skills to help others. We appreciate every last one of them — but it’s especially touching when someone who has lived through the experience of being a refugee or immigrant comes forward to help others.

An fine example is Zahra al-Dakheel. She is a Susan Buffett Scholar at the University of Nebraska Lincoln, where she is studying to be a speech pathologist. As an intern this fall, Zahra has taught English to refugees and immigrants at Culler Middle School, Saint Paul United Methodist Church, and Everett Elementary; she has helped in our computer class at Bennett Martin Public Library, and she has put her considerable graphic design skills to work helping us with publications like this – in short she has done it all. She brings the passion of lived experience to her work.

Facing persecution from the dread regime of Saddam Hussein, her family fled Iraq when she was just five years old – to Syria, of all places. “If [Saddam’s security forces] had

caught us we would have been either tortured or dead,” she said. A year later they were able to come to America as refugees.

Both parents went to work, and Zahra, the eldest of three children, went to school. There she found another kind of persecution.

“I used to come home crying because kids would tease me about my scarf, calling me a ‘raghead,’ ‘terrorist,’ and all sorts of other names,” she recalls. Her parents told her to keep trying her best and promised her things would get better if she did. “They shaped me into a strong young woman, my own person,

See *Newcomers*, p. 3



Zahra (r) and her cousin in Iraq

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If You Can Read This, You Can Surely Help!

Lincoln Literacy depends on volunteer tutors to get the job done. We offer highly effective training and support to the volunteers who teach our students. Tutors have a wide range of choices, from serving in classrooms or as one-to-one tutors. For more info, click “Get Involved” at our website. lincolnliteracy.org

Lincoln Literacy and Lincoln City Libraries Team Up for a World-Spanning Summer Family Literacy Class

For eight weeks this summer, families from around the world came to the one place in Lincoln that contains many worlds — the library. Gathering twice a week at Bennett Martin Public Library, families from Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa lunched and learned together. In all, 15 adults and 36 children took part in the program.

The parents focused on English and beginning computer skills, while the children enjoyed reading activities, learning games, and a chance to engage with some technology for themselves.

The adult classes were taught by Lincoln Literacy volunteers, while the children were in the charge of two certified teachers who were giving a year of service to Lincoln Literacy as members of AmeriCorps. Rik Minnick and Shelly Patrick (seen below) read stories and led creative projects with the kids.

Funded by a generous private grant from the Colleran Family



to the Lincoln City Libraries Foundation and by United Way, which supports Lincoln Literacy's FLAIR family literacy, the program was a true collaboration. Library staff prepared lunches and taught participants about how to use the library for their fullest benefit, and library reading specialist Katie Murtha worked with the children every day, along with Lincoln Literacy's staff teachers.

Lincoln Literacy staff and volunteers took the lead in the computer classes, which in addition to helping participants learn English imparted critical survival skills.

Guest presenters in oral health, consumer rights, and safe use of technology helped enrich the curriculum for all. Children learned to love both books and i-Pads.

As the program neared its end, the classes took a field trip to the Nebraska Historical Society so that both parents and children could learn more about their new home.



◆ Opening Up New Worlds

Continued from Page 1

her husband, going from Level 0 to Level 4. Now, she is about to become a mother, but Bari plans to resume her studies. The two of them agree that learning English is the key to a successful new life in America, where pretty much any job beats searching through roadside debris for IEDs.

Lincoln Literacy's English Language & Literacy Academy has helped many others over the last year — and in so doing helped Nebraska businesses get their jobs done. Dr. Jiahong Li is a scientist from China who holds a key post at Li-Cor Biosciences, a Lincoln-based manufacturer of scientific instruments. Although his English is quite good, Jiahong had difficulties making himself understood. But since working with Lincoln Literacy's Carrie Knapp, he's improved a great deal.

Between classes, Jiahong practices with recordings at home. Carrie says he's among our most diligent students.

Jorge Tome, originally of Mexico, has a lot going for himself. He has an American wife, three children, and his own contracting business: he is a skilled plasterer and drywaller.

There was just one thing he lacked: a solid command of English. Some builders refused to do business with him because they were concerned he wouldn't understand what they needed. So, for the past year after work, Jorge has been coming straight to Lincoln Literacy classes, and over that time he has improved by two levels.

Sandra Rojo, who coordinates the classes he attends in our collaboration with El Centro de las Americas, says it's always inspiring to see him come in his dusty overalls eager to learn. Jorge's efforts have paid off. One of the builders who refused him work last year has now given him a contract.

◆ Newcomers Give Back as Tutors

Continued from Page 1

a leader," she says. She is certainly all that and more.

Zahra is just one of several newcomers to our country who are giving back. Sammer Sadat, originally of Afghanistan, is another UNL student who gives outstanding service as a volunteer tutor. Myung Hea Yoon of Korea has also gone through Lincoln Literacy's training to become a tutor.

Then there is the remarkable husband-and-wife team of Balazs Feher and Alina Gavra.

She is a psychologist from Romania; he is a third-year doctoral student in political science from Hungary. Both have a command of English that would put many Americans to shame. Not that they would shame anyone – they are caring people who take time out of busy lives to help others.

Alina says, "I'm overwhelmed by the joy of always learning alongside my students. They are people of admirable courage and determination for living in a society where they struggle with the language and yet find it in them to try day by day and ultimately succeed. Playing even a small part in that is a great honor for me." Balazs agrees. Despite the demands of grad school, he asked himself "When will I finally get to contribute to making this world a better place? You know, have an impact, help real people. ... Lincoln Literacy was very high on my list — mostly because of Alina's experience."



Alina and Balazs love to help others.

Jail Program Provides Hope through Learning

With the opening of the new county jail came a new opportunity. Starting in February, Lincoln Literacy began offering weekly English language and literacy classes in the spacious classrooms at the new facility on West O St.

"We were all a bit nervous going in," recalls Executive Director Clayton Naff, who took personal charge of the program for the first several months. "Those of us who were involved had to go through training at the jail on what to do in case of emergencies. But we quickly realized that everyone coming to the classes really wanted to learn, and that in many ways we represent the best hope for their futures."

One of the participants, a man who grew up in St. Louis but could barely read at all, said his goal was to be able to write a letter to his mother. That was powerful motivation for volunteer tutor Don Schmidt.

So stringent are the safety regulations at the jail that staff cannot bring in anything but paper. Even paperclips and ordinary pencils are banned, because of their potential to be put to harmful use. This has meant an extra burden for the program's coordinator, Joe Hams. Every week he has to make copies of all the teaching materials for every tutor.

All the same, both he and the tutors are enthusiastic for their work. So are the learners. The results are even more impressive than the average for Lincoln Literacy students.

The program is funded by the county jail's education fund and a New Beginnings grant from Woods Charitable Fund.

Mayor's Award Goes to Kurdish Mom Learning with Her Kids

At Lincoln Literacy's Annual Awards Luncheon, held in late June, Mayor Chris Beutler was on hand to present the Mayor's Award for Language and Literacy Achievement to Nidema Malko. In presenting her with the award, Mayor Beutler noted that newcomers, from Serge Brin of Google to the owners of Pan Dulce bakery here in Lincoln, start new businesses at a higher rate than any other group. "That's just one of the reasons we are proud of Lincoln's designation as a welcoming city for immigrants," the mayor said.

In nominating her student, volunteer tutor Marge McCabe said, "As a Kurdish refugee from Northern Iraq, Nidema was not able to attend school. She is very eager to learn. She studies outside of class and has made unusually fast progress in learning English and the culture of the U.S. She had no knowledge of English just eight months ago!"

Malko is part of a large Kurdish family from Iraq. The Kurds were brutally oppressed under Saddam Hussein and were then caught up in the civil conflict that followed the 2003 U.S. invasion to depose Saddam. Starting life anew in Lincoln, Nidema enrolled in Lincoln Literacy's family literacy classes at Roper Elementary, along with her two young sons. They flourished in the children's classes, while Nidema gave them a run for the money in hers. Over the course of a school year, she jumped three levels on the Basic English Skills Test, gaining confidence along the way.





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Our mission is to assist people of all cultures and strengthen our community by teaching English language and literacy skills.

Lincoln Literacy is proud to be affiliated with:



Scrabble Pays Off in Fun and Fundraising!

Lincoln Literacy had its most successful Scrabble Scramble fundraising tournament ever this fall. Four-person teams, 28 in all, gathered at Holy Trinity Episcopal Church on a bright Sunday afternoon in early November. With Channel 10/11 meteorologist Brad Anderson as MC and City Council Member Carl Eskridge as referee, they went at it in three



rounds of intense but friendly competition. When the letters settled, some phenomenal words had been played and towering scores accumulated.

Two teams – the Blankety Blanks and the Word Nerdz – faced off in the final.

In the end, the Blankety Blanks took home the trophy. Plenty of other prizes were given out, and everyone seemed to have a good time. Said one participant, “I had three first-time players on my team and all of them said they would do this again. We really did have a lot of fun.”

Thanks to the generosity of a record number of sponsors – 41 in all – the event raised a record amount of money for Lincoln Literacy: \$14,250. Our heartfelt thanks to all the sponsors, players, and volunteers. You can find photos, scores of the leading teams, and a roll call of the fabulous sponsors at our website.



Meteorologist Brad Anderson

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