

Student Success Stories



Helping Nevada adults improve basic skills and get jobs through GED, Career Pathways, Literacy, ESL, Civics, Citizenship, & Transition to Postsecondary programs. Nevada Adult Education services are federally funded through the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, Title II of the Workforce Investment Act.

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These adult students ACE it!

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Editor's note: Community Multicultural Center (CMC, www.cmclv.org) is one of eight Adult Basic Education Programs in Nevada. The programs are federally funded through the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act and provide instruction in literacy, English Language Learning, GED preparation, and career pathways. CMC serves an additional population through its Adult Core Education (ACE) segment, an individualized reading and writing program for adults with learning challenges.

I find that one of the most important aspects of working with adults is addressing their self-judgment and embarrassment because they cannot read and write adequately, if at all.

The world of illiteracy is one of coping, instability and an ever-present sense of self-doubt. Most walk through society trying not to be seen in order to hide their secret — they cannot read and write. I see amazingly capable and courageous individuals who have managed to overcome their life challenges and provide for themselves and their families. They contribute to society in powerfully undervalued ways.

Entering a literacy program takes enormous courage, motivation, and commitment. I am humbled by my students' experiences and how they have overcome so much that I take for granted.

Following are stories about two of my adult learners. Once we established rapport and trust, they freely shared their stories, but trying to express them in writing was challenging for them. They experienced much frustration, anxiety, fear, and doubt. But they did it!



CMC Tutors Evelyn Johnson (lower left) and Alison Johnsen (upper right) with Alem Woldemicael (behind Evelyn) and other ACE students.

Alem Woldemicael: From ABC to GED

Alem works full-time and is raising three children, one of whom was born in the first term of our ACE program this school year (2011-12). She also supports her husband, who has health challenges.

“My name is Alem. I am from Ethiopia. I am 35 years old. I love to go to school every day so I will have my GED. And I will have a better job for me and better life for my kids. I work at the Monte Carlo. I worked at the Monte Carlo from the day it opened (June 15th, 1996). If I don't have school, I like to play with my children, go to the movies, cook good food, or go out to eat.”

When Alem and I started working together almost two years ago, she was still working on her ABCs. She juggles a lot in her life but still finds ways to complete her adult literacy work. She has no formal education; the civil war in Ethiopia prevented her from going to school when she was a little girl. Both of her parents died and her oldest sister raised Alem with two other siblings. Despite this amazing “excuse” for not being educated, she still feels bad that she was not.

She came to America from Ethiopia alone, at the age of 15, seeking a better life. But she was frustrated and embarrassed because she could not read or write. She struggled in an ESL Program at the Clark County Library and was referred to CMC's ACE Program, where she could receive the individual attention she needed.

Alem needed to learn how to learn as well as the mechanics and nuances of English. Her progress has been remarkable. She is now testing at the third-fourth grade level — three grade levels from where she started! She

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Tony McCraney: Paying it forward

Tony McCraney grew up in Chicago during a time when many athletes with special learning needs were pushed through the system. He, too, was referred to the Community Multicultural Center by the Library's CALL program because he was uncomfortable in a large class setting and CALL felt he could be better served in a tutoring program focused on his special needs.

Tony's primary goal is to read and write efficiently and fully participate in his Bible Study group. Tony has lived a very successful life. He was a forklift driver at General Motors for 30 years and, with his wife, raised three daughters. He enjoys a vibrant social life. When asked why he committed to ACE his response was, "It was time. I didn't learn much in school because the teachers didn't care [about special ed kids] and I could see the teachers at CALL and CMC did care about me."

"My name is Tony McCraney, I am from Chicago, Illinois. I am 53 years old. I started grammar school in 1962. I went to Proviso East High School in Maywood, Illinois. I was in Special Ed. One of my goals is to learn to read the Bible. Maybe when I learn to how to read, I will learn how to write better too. But it is very hard to do. I [will] keep trying."

Tony recounted numerous experiences of trying to hide his literacy issues. For example, he once "shadowed" a dinner date he was trying to impress, ordering whatever she ordered, because he couldn't read the menu. He passed up promotions at his job, claiming that he was content with his current level. He talked about confusion at the airport because he couldn't read the passenger pickup sign. He hoped to blend in at his Bible Study class, but some people questioned why the facilitator skipped him. He experienced deep embarrassment in ad-

mitting that he couldn't read; his palms get sweaty and he gets headaches trying to figure out what things say.

When I began working with him he was reading at approximately the level of a second-grader. A year later, he is closing in on grade three! Together, we have discovered methods that assist his short-term memory and practiced touch tones that help him navigate a world of endless challenges. (Touch-tones are actions, thoughts, or words that help the students associate and remember what they are learning in their own unique ways.)

One of the greatest challenges we face is "untraining" the coping mechanisms he established in childhood. Technology has unlocked a new optimism in Tony! He recently acquired an iPad 2. In addition to working with Reading Horizons Online, access to apps that talk — such as the Dictionary, the Bible, and others — are greatly influencing his progress.

Tony keenly understands that he will "never stop learning," and that is a concept he must commit to. He "learned his way through his marriage" and describes similarities in his ACE experience. "I didn't know the proper way to read and write, so I learned by watching, listening, and asking questions."

Tony graduated from high school in 1977 because his teachers kept passing him. He was aware of his literacy challenges and as a result he didn't even attempt to pursue his dream of being a professional athlete. He watched his contemporaries become pros as he continued to try to hide and work at a level he knew he could handle. I constantly remind him that he *can* read and write regardless of how limited he judges it to be. His confidence has significantly increased. He now plans to visit his high school and motivate students similar to him to find their unique learning methods so they can fulfill their dreams.

Alem *(Continued from page 1)*

has gone from identifying letters and sounds to spelling, constructing sentences, and understanding basic grammar and punctuation.

Because all ACE students work with the Reading Horizons Online program, Alem is simultaneously learning vital computer skills necessary to compete in today's market. She is now able to read street signs and basic instructions, do homework with her kids, and use a computer. Since participating in the ACE program her confidence has increased and she feels

more independent.

Alem has shared stories about how she would get lost because she could not read signs or addresses. Now she can read where she is going! While the GED is a lofty goal, I believe she's got the commitment and drive to make it. She eventually plans to go back to Ethiopia and help kids and adults like her learn to read. She is already participating in community drives that send money back to Ethiopia to assist with education.

