



Opening up the world with literacy

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Adults in the region who struggle with reading, writing, or understanding spoken English face challenges that many of us might not think of: reading medication labels, getting a driver's license, or helping children or grandchildren with school work.

"It is very difficult to live as an adult without being able to read or write, but it's also hard to start looking for help," says Devon Hoffman, program director of the [Rio Arriba Adult Literacy Program](#) (RAALP), which offers free, one-to-one adult literacy tutoring for students who need support either with basic literacy or are learning English as a second language.

Statistics suggest around 25% of Rio Arriba County residents lack basic literacy skills, and about 34% speak only limited English.

A shortage of tutors

RAALP, which is supported by Laboratory employees and by Lab operator Triad through the Employee Giving Campaign, has a team of volunteer certified tutors who currently work with 38 students in public places such as Española Library, usually for two hours once or twice per week. Tutors form a strong personal relationship with their students, but the organization is always looking for more tutors to provide support for a waiting list of students.

"Adult literacy students often make big changes in their lives as their reading, writing, or English-comprehension skills improve," says Hoffman. "One of our students came to us so she could pass her citizenship test, and now she's looking at higher education programs."

Tutors complete a full-day training program provided by the New Mexico Coalition for Literacy, and receive support from RAALP as they work with their adult student. Each student sets their own goals for what they would like to achieve, and the tutors create an individualized plan to help them work towards their target.

"This personalized approach can be much more effective and flexible than a classroom-style curriculum," says Hoffmann. "And it's a fulfilling cultural and personal exchange for both people - a dynamic that breaks down some of the boundaries that exist in our communities."

Steve Glick, a retired Laboratory employee who serves on the board of RAALP, is in his second year of tutoring a young married father in his early 30s, working on basic literacy. His student's reading and writing skill level was initially assessed to be at a 1st or 2nd grade level, but after the first year of tutoring, his reassessment improved to

a 2nd-3rd grade level. “The sense of accomplishment and joy was written all over his face, and mine,” says Steve.

“I’ve developed a deep respect and appreciation of the myriad of simple daily life challenges this person has to face and the intricate navigational skills he's been able to develop and employ to get by . . . Usually at the end of each tutoring session I'm not sure who has gained more from the experience, him or me!”

Looking ahead

For the future, RAALP is looking to cooperate with other nonprofits to pilot a childcare program to make it easier for students to attend their tutoring sessions. They’re also exploring a laptop loan-to-own program (with assistance from Española-based business Bluelink IT) that would allow students to continue their language learning at home.

“One of our students, who has faced homelessness and addiction in the past, is now looking to start a creative writing program for other members of the community who have had similar experiences,” says Hoffman. “For whatever reason, school systems or family systems have let some people down when it comes to basic literacy, and we can help them gain the skills they need to achieve their personal and professional goals.”

“While not always easy or simple, feeling the joy of helping someone expand their literacy skills to apply for a job, to register to vote, to gain a driver's license, or to simply read a bed-time story to their children - gives one a sense of peace and fulfillment,” says Glick. “It is certainly a deep and personal commitment to helping another human being grow and become more - and that's the greatest gift a tutor can ever give.”

RAALP’s next tutor training days are on March 14 and 21. [More information is available here.](#)

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