

Volunteer Will Use New Start To Help Adults Learn To Read

BY SUSAN USHER

As a young woman growing up in southern Brunswick County, Elnora (Marlow) Mitchell made a pledge to herself—one she was to keep.

"I vowed... that my children would not have to struggle for an education like I did—that I would give them that chance."

She did. Of her children Wrathel, Opal, Sybil, Angela and Cynthia, all who wanted to go on to college did.

Mrs. Mitchell had made another pledge—to herself, to continue her own schooling. And at age 65, she walked down the aisle in cap and gown to receive her GED certificate from Brunswick Technical College. The class ring she wears proudly will eventually be placed with keepsakes for her children.

As the new VISTA (Volunteer In Service To America) worker with the Brunswick County Literacy Council, the 66-year-old mother and grandmother wants to fulfill a third goal, a dream born of her own delayed accomplishments: to provide other adults the opportunity to learn to read, to open doors through education.

"It feels like a new beginning," she said of the job. "No, I'm not nervous. I'm relaxed."

"I'm looking forward to—whatever!"

As the council's recruiter, she will help increase community awareness of the literacy problem in Brunswick County and seek community support for the council's work, as well as recruiting tutors and students. The non-profit council trains volunteer tutors who teach adults now to read on a one-to-one basis in the privacy of their homes. Materials are furnished at no charge to the student. Students are encouraged to complete their formal education when the tutoring ends.

According to the 1980 U.S. census there are 5,602 persons over age 25 in the county who have less than a ninth-grade education; another 5,602 have less than a high school education.

Many of these individuals are functionally illiterate, which means they don't have the basic skills such as reading and math needed to get along day by day—on their jobs or at home.

It's a big responsibility, but Mrs. Mitchell likes new challenges.

"I don't give up easily," she said, with the look of knowing the source of her own strength. "I always told my kids, 'Have faith. As long as what you're doing is right, it will work out. The Lord will work it out.'"

As for helping adult non-readers, she's eager to begin. For many Brunswick County citizens, her own story will provide inspiration.

"I feel like I can help. If there's anything in a person to do something about it (a desire to learn to read), I have something to give."

Born "sandwiched" in a family of six children, she



WHEN SHE'S NOT promoting literacy, VISTA volunteer Elnora Mitchell can be found working around her home at Supply, surrounded by the flowers she and her husband Pat both love.

became the only girl after a younger sister died at an early age.

"I attended no more than nine or 10 days of school a year—and that was doing good," she reflected. "I had not attended school more than 100 days before taking the GED class."

When she last went to school, she studied fourth or fifth grade materials, she recalled, "whatever the teacher would let me do."

"When I begged to go to school, they said no." As a girl, her parents thought she was more badly needed at home, where she had total responsibility for a younger sibling along with her other work.

"My brothers taught me to read. They went to school more than I did because I was a girl."

Distance was a factor also. The No. 5 schoolhouse was on the road to Longwood, a good distance from their

home near Thomasboro—too long a walk for a small girl, especially in bad weather.

However, by the time her youngest brother came along, her father had a pickup truck and took the boys in the neighborhood to school.

"Jethro went on to college," she said, no trace of bitterness or envy in her voice, only a certain matter-of-factness.

To make sure her own children had that same opportunity, she worked and saved, even when she and her husband Waymond (Pat) didn't have to have the money.

"It's better to work before you have to," she philosophized, sitting at the kitchen table of the neat brick home her husband had built in the Royal Oak community at Supply.

So she worked in a mill and in other women's homes as a domestic, but in those early years, mainly in the fields.

She planted potatoes, set tobacco, pulled peanuts, broke corn—whatever work was available. But she worked barefooted.

With memories strong of the days when shoes were hard to come by and important to take care of, "I didn't want dirt in my shoes."

She worked hard and well, earning praise—and higher wages—from her employers.

"I was always taught by my father that anything I did, to do it well," she said. So whether working in the field or kitchen, she used the same economies of time and material she used in working at her own home.

When her daughter Sybil returned home from college to teach in the local schools, Mrs. Mitchell recalled, "She wanted to do something for the kids in the community. I told her to go talk to Jesse (Clemmons) at the college (the dean of instruction who lives up the road from the Mitchells).

"He said they didn't have anything for children, but that they had this education program for adults."

"When she told me, I said to her, 'I'm your first student.'"

Even when ready to take the GED exam, she stayed on in the class to encourage fellow students, sometimes starting the class when Sybil was going to be late from school.

"I studied for about three years," she said.

In the meantime, Sybil signed up for a Laubach tutor training workshop at the college, enrolling her mother as well.

The local literacy council evolved from that first group of tutors.

Mrs. Mitchell knew she wanted to use her newly-acquired education and training to help others, but she wasn't certain how.

"I was waiting," she said. "This just came to me."

She gave up a seasonal job shucking oysters to take the position. She and her family thought the work that important.

"If I can just relate to somebody, help to lift somebody up, that is what is in it for me," she said.

"I will have my reward."

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