

# Literacy Programs Opening Doors For Brunswick's Adult Learners

BY SUSAN USHER

It's been said that for every door that closes, another opens. Opening new doors for adult learners is what the literacy program at Brunswick Community College is all about.

According to Willie Fullwood, director of the college's special programs, the literacy program offers adults the basic skills they need to qualify for a job or a promotion, or to meet other personal goals. "Students determine their own goals," said Willie Fullwood. "We are there to help them reach those goals."

One 85-year-old man, for example, had never been able to sign his name, recounted Jesse Clemmons, dean of continuing education. The man enrolled, learned how to make his signature and dropped out.

"That was his goal; he had succeeded," said Clemmons, who grinned and added, "We're going to get him back."

Clemmons is confident of that because the basic education program is designed to breed success, encouraging students to erase past learning experiences and set new goals, including obtaining a high school equivalency (GED) diploma or even a college degree.

For many students, earning a GED diploma is the goal, and participation BCC's commencement exercise their greatest moment. "It means so much to some of them to finally say, 'I'm going to march down that aisle,'" said Vickie Hardee, assessment/retention specialist.

Clemmons added, "At graduation you can literally feel the electricity in the air."

"It's even more of a thrill to step into a class and see people learning to read and write and do basic math."

To help put students at their ease, classes are typically held not at the college campus, but in the community, in familiar settings such as a neighborhood center or church.

For beginning students who either are uncomfortable in a classroom setting or desire greater privacy, the college coordinates its efforts with the Brunswick County Literacy Council.

Working from an office at the college, the council provides free tutors to work one-on-one with adult new readers. Tutoring can be in the privacy of the student's or tutor's home, or sometimes in conjunction with one of the college's basic education class.

### Demand High

In the past six months, the college's basic education and high school programs have taken "a real forward jump," according to Clemmons.

As of mid-March 225 students were enrolled in classes offered at 18 locations by approximately 30 instructors, he told members of the college's board of trustees last Wednesday night.

Classes will be offered as soon as possible in five additional locations, in response to local demand. Said Earthly Waters, one of two recruiters hired to promote the program door-to-door throughout the county, "We can't be everywhere at once."

High demand for community classes, she noted, indicates "evidently this was something our county really needed and wanted."

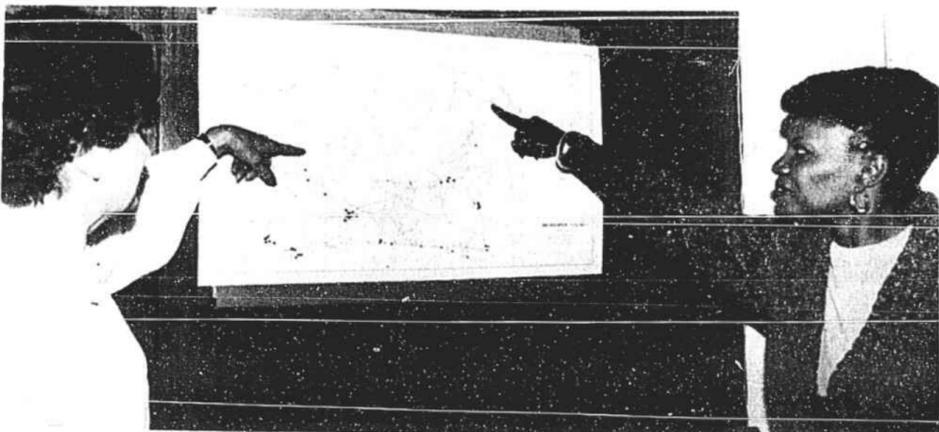
BCC has had a literacy program since its founding, its efforts limited by size and funding until recently. A change in funding by the Department of Community College has allowed the college to hire former BCC Learning Lab Assistant Vickie Hardee as assessment/retention specialist and Ms. Waters and Edna Magers as recruiters.

And a nationwide publicity campaign, PLUS, has increased public awareness of the need for—and availability of literacy programs.

The state funding reflects the evolution over the past two years of literacy as a primary focus of the community college system. In a 1986 keynote address speech, Community Colleges President Bob Scott described North Carolina as having the third most illiterate workforce in the country, ranking only behind two states in the lower South. He added that a lack of workers with adequate reading, writing and math skills makes it difficult for North Carolina to compete with other states for industries that offer employment for skilled labor, including those using new technologies such as computers and robotics.

### Closing Doors

Locally, the demand for more highly-skilled workers is also being seen. Fewer and fewer employers are hiring



RECRUITERS Edna Magers and Earthly Waters (above) are helping organize literacy classes "in parts of the county you'd never imagine," according to Dean of Continuing Education Jesse Clemmons, from

Kingtown to Dark Branch. Their efforts are uncovering a high demand for basic reading, writing and math skills among the county's adult population.

STAFF PHOTO BY SUSAN USHER

persons without at least a high school diploma or its equivalent.

"Over the last two years," said Ms. Hardee, "we have seen more local industries and businesses begin requiring a high school diploma—first CP&L, then others."

When an industry first announces such a requirement, she said, classes fill up. Sometimes students are under pressure to learn basic skills quickly. "They may have to have it to be promoted or the company may be holding a job for them."

One grocery, for instance, requires a high school diploma. A worker without it will be hired as a cashier for three months while going to school. If they don't succeed in their educational program, they're laid off.

Students who once dropped out of high school and entered the military are finding that door shut also. All require at least a high school equivalency diploma combined with AFSQT scores higher than those required of high school graduates, while the Air Force insists on a high school diploma.

Jesse Clemmons entered Shallotte High School with 111 ninth graders. In 1961, 51 of them graduated; only two went on to college. "Chances are high most of them are right around here somewhere," he said.

Ms. Waters graduated in 1964 from Brunswick County Training School in Southport. Of the 117 students who began ninth grade with her, 26 graduated.

Twenty years ago, a college degree or a high school diploma wasn't viewed as necessary in a rural community such as Brunswick County, where most people earned a living fishing or farming.

But, said Fullwood, "We're living in a more technologically functioning society. We're not making a living the way our parents did."

Definitions of "illiterate" and "functional illiterate" reflect the rapid changes in the skills required by society.

Until only recently, "illiterate" was the term used to describe someone who could not read and write at all. "Functional illiterate" described someone who had some basic skills, but not enough to cope with the demands of day-to-day living.

Not any more, according to Clemmons. Today's citizen needs the equivalent of an eighth-grade education, with a high school education the standard.

With its 1980 forms, the U.S. Census Bureau began making fewer distinctions in educational accomplishments less than a high school diploma. Either respondents had 0-8 years of schooling, or did not complete high school.

### Students Varied

Students come from all walks of life, with reasons as varied as their ages and occupations.

Many have spent all or part of a lifetime "covering up" their lack of reading or writing skills, in the process developing keener-than-average listening and memory skills, Clemmons said.

And, as BCC Trustee Cora Green noted, they are often people who are intelligent, successful in other areas of their lives, with much potential for further achievement.

When she enters a new community and finds more people who want to learn basic skills, it offers food for thought.

"It's all hidden," she noted. "You always ask yourself, 'If there are this many here in this community, how many more are there out there?'"

## ABE, GED Core Elements Of BCC Literacy Effort

Brunswick County College channels its literacy efforts primarily through two types of classes: ABE and GED, according to Willie Fullwood, director of special programs. Both are open to adults at no cost.

ABE or Adult Basic Education is aimed at students age 16 and older who are functioning at or below the eighth-grade level. Attending classes in their local communities, students study reading, writing, consumer education and community services, social studies, basic science, math and health education.

Students who complete the ABE program are encouraged to continue their studies in the GED or General Educational Development program. Students who complete the program and attain acceptable scores on a state GED exam earn a high school equivalency diploma. Studies include English, social studies, science, reading and math.

A third program, ESL, English as a Second Language, is offered on demand, and was offered for the first time last summer, said Fullwood. It is designed to teach English to adults who are literate in another language. In this area, classes are typically needed in the spring and summer, when migrant laborers are working in the area.

For more information on any literacy program offered by the college, contact the Continuing Education Department, 754-6900.

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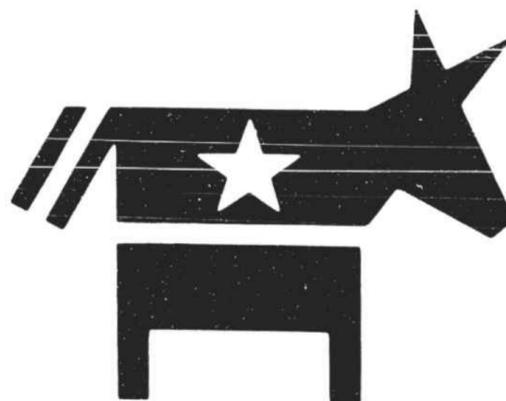
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