

CLASSES, TUTORS ARE PROVIDED FREE

County Literacy Programs Help Make Dreams Come True

BY SUSAN USHER

There are few things Ethel Bland likes better than reading aloud to her grandchildren, Shannon, 5, and Jerrell, 1.

When Shannon suggests, "Grandmama, let's read," Mrs. Bland pulls out a story book she's checked out from the West Brunswick Branch Library and begins to read.

But it wasn't so long ago that the 63-year-old Shallotte resident could neither read nor write. Reading to her grandchildren was something she only dreamed about.

As a child, she had been taken in and out of school to work and to care for younger brothers and sisters. Over a period of years she made it through about the fourth grade, she estimated during a recent interview.

Mrs. Bland knew the alphabet and her numbers—enough that she could tell if someone was cheating her.

Today she's proud to say that she's a new adult reader, and just as proud to see her grandchildren as interested in reading and learning as she is.

Her success story begins in 1987, when she got to know Sue McCann. Ms. McCann, a Shallotte resident, was a Hospice volunteer for Mrs. Bland's husband, Willie, who has since died.

"While I was working with the family Ethel would hand me bills and other mail," recalled Ms. McCann. "One day I asked if she could read and write as well as she'd like. She said no and that she'd like to learn."

She's the exception. Many adults who lack basic literacy skills are much more reluctant to admit it, or to seek out help. A relative of Mrs. Bland's, for example, asked if Ms. McCann would tutor her as well. She turned down the offer of another tutor, probably because it was someone she didn't know.

"There's a terrible reluctance to get a tutor," said Ms. McCann. "It's clear she wanted to learn, but..."

Ms. McCann had taken a literacy tutor training workshop offered by the Brunswick County Literacy Council in November 1986. She and Mrs. Bland were soon a team, each learning from the other. Ms. McCann's convinced their relationship is anything but typical.

"I'm learning about Southern culture and she's learning to read and write," said Ms. McCann. "I don't think of myself as her tutor. We're a lot more than that. We're good buddies."

Looking with affection at her partner, Mrs. Bland agreed and said their relationship is working out well.

"It's been going good with me," she said. "I love it. I told her I wanted to learn how to read and write. I want to read the Bible and get some understanding from it."

Little by little, that's what they're doing.

The two "buddies" typically spend a half-day together once a week—a get-together both look forward to sharing. After studying together for several hours, they may shop, eat lunch out or run errands. Most outings offer opportunities for Mrs. Bland to use her still-improving reading skills.

"We'll drive through town and she'll read all the signs to me," said Ms. McCann. "We'll go to a restaurant and Ethel picks the restaurant and chooses from the menu."

When Ms. McCann travels, she sends postcards to her student. On her return, they retrace the travel route on a map.

One recent week Mrs. Bland was practicing how to write a check. That day Ms. McCann planned to accompany her to a local financial institution to open a savings account. A little later Mrs. Bland plans to establish a checking account as well.

Working with her tutor Mrs. Bland has learned about community resources available to her as an elder-



SUE MCCANN AND ETHEL BLAND have more than the typical tutor-student relationship. They've become "good buddies" in the course of working together.

"I want to read the Bible and get some understanding from it."

—Ethel Bland
Literacy student

ly widow. She's applied for Social Security, SSI and Medicaid. Much of what they do doesn't come from a textbook, though that's the starting point for most lessons.

Ms. McCann said that with another type of student—younger, with different goals or job-related needs—her approach to tutoring would differ. "We'd probably meet twice a week and work a lot harder and faster," she said.

But for now, she and Mrs. Bland set a slower, more social pace suited to Mrs. Bland's age and needs. "She's come a long way and we've had fun getting there," said Ms. McCann. "It's kind of special. I don't think our relationship is typical at all."

It may or may not be. "The tutor-student relationship is the heart of it," says Gladys Wagenseil, coordinator for the Brunswick County Literacy Council. At any given time the council has between 50 and 70 tutors placed. Most, but not all, work with adults age 16 and older in a private setting. A handful work with public school students at the middle school level or older, others work with adults but in a

classroom setting.

Ms. Wagenseil said every pairing of tutor and student is unique. Tutors generally are assigned to adults who range from not being able to read or write at all to working at no more than a fourth or fifth grade reading level. Recently, she said, most students who have sought help seem to have some basic skills but see a need to improve.

Some tutors and students work together a few months, others for years. Some move quickly through the materials, others more slowly. It depends on the ability and interest of the student and the time available to him or her.

Some students quit and never return; others quit and come back when family- or work-related complications ease up. Some gain the confidence to enter Adult Basic Education (ABE) classes offered by Brunswick Community College. Some students enroll in a class, but continue to work with a tutor either at home or in the classroom. That's because the Brunswick County Literacy Council and Brunswick Community College's Literacy Programs have a distinctive relationship.

Instead of viewing each other as competition, the two programs work together in an effort to make sure that any adult in the county who wants to learn to read and write can do so.

The literacy council was founded by BCC after then-President Joe Carter, the late Jesse Clemmons and other school officials saw a need to extend literacy services to people who, out of fear or lack of transportation or some other reason, either wouldn't or couldn't enroll in classes offered by the college.

Willie Fullwood, director of BCC's literacy programs, said the college provides the council with office space at the old BCC campus at Supply, and also provides many basic supplies. Tutors are trained through the college's continuing education department.

Through its literacy program, BCC offers students four options: Adult Basic Education, ABE, which offers instruction for students working up through the fourth grade level; General Education Development, for those working toward the equivalent of a high school diploma; English As a Second Language (ESL), for non-English speaking students; and compensatory education through the Brunswick Intercity Program. During the 1989-90 year, the college served 325 ABE, 350 GED, 46 BIP and 42 ESL students.

Classes were cut last year because of budget shortages, but this year the programs are "off and running," said Fullwood. Once the dust has settled, he expects to have about 20 ABE classes scheduled across the county. A majority of those classes will meet in churches. County churches have been "just tremendous" about providing space, pulpit leadership and recruiting effort, Fullwood said.

Fullwood also is working to establish more "workplace" literacy projects, such as one now in place at Sea Trail Golf Links. These are situations where an employer provides a classroom site and some type of incentives for employee participation. Typically, the business may pay the employee for one hour of class time and the employee volunteer the other.

In turn, BCC provides a teacher and the BCLC tutors, if needed. BCC is also studying the feasibility of offering a high school diploma program in cooperation with the Brunswick County Schools.

The working relationship between the literacy council and college is important, because, as is true statewide, the two together still reach only a fraction of the people who could make use of their free services.

Based on the most recent statistics available—1980 U.S. Census figures and school drop-out rates, it is estimated that there are between 5,000 and 7,000 adults in Brunswick County who are functionally illiterate.

These individuals lack the basic reading and writing skills most people need to get by on a day-to-day basis. They cannot read a letter from a creditor or the label on a medicine bottle. Still, most get along—sometimes very well—by relying on their intelligence and on friends and relatives who do read and write.

Like Ethel Bland, often non-readers don't seek help until their source of help just isn't there any more.

Information about BCC's literacy programs is available by calling the college at 754-6900. Information on the literacy council's tutoring service is available by calling 754-7323.

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