

## VISTAs Help Spread Message Of Hope, Garner Support For Literacy Effort

BY SUSAN USHER

As VISTA volunteers with the Brunswick County Literacy Council, Lila Millett, Brenda Grissett and Edith Bridger face a big challenge: spreading word about the council's services and helping establish a solid base of financial support for its future.

VISTA is the acronym for Volunteers In Service To America, the federal government's domestic equivalent of the Peace Corps. Volunteers make a one-year, full-time commitment to service, aimed at improving the quality of life for residents of their assigned community. In turn, VISTAs receive a "subsistence" allowance, insurance and ongoing training.

The three locally-recruited volunteers working with BCLC are "essentially outreach workers," said Gladys Wagenseil, program coordinator for the council. "They tell our story, recruit volunteers and seek referrals of adults who want to learn to read and write." They also help coordinate fund-raising events and special events carried out by other council volunteers.

Their task isn't to replace other council volunteers; in fact it's just the opposite.

One of their goals is to secure the network of resources that supports the work of the literacy council, leaving it larger and stronger at the end of their one-year stint than it was when they came.

The most challenging and sometimes frustrating part of their assignment, all three agreed in a recent interview, is reaching the council's target clients—adults and older teens with little or no reading and/or writing ability who want to improve their skills.

Most clients ask for a tutor after learning about the council from someone who can read and who encourages them to learn—another literacy student, a family member, a caseworker, their pastor, someone at work.

The council offers free tutoring and protects the confidentiality of its students. Its services offer an alternative to those who are uncomfortable with a classroom setting, lack confidence in their abilities or otherwise need one-on-one attention. It has tutors trained to work with non-English speaking students as well.

Much of the VISTAs' day-to-day contact is with community leaders in civic groups, churches, town halls, service agencies and industries—people who can pass on information about the free services available through the literacy council.

Millett is assigned to the middle section of the county, Ms. Bridger to the northern end and Ms. Grissett to the western end. Within that broad area each has targeted specific communities for outreach efforts.

Recently several have teamed up to go door-to-door in specific neighborhoods, something Ms. Wagenseil expects they'll be doing more of in the coming weeks.

Each VISTA brings to the year-long posting a concern for the welfare of others and a unique set of talents and experiences.

Lila Millett, a former employee of Lower Cape Fear Hospice, has worked "both sides of the fence"—as a volunteer and as someone who supervises volunteers.

As a former co-chairman of the literacy council, she



VISTAs (from left) Edith Bridger, Brenda Grissett and Lila Millett have a mission: Building a stronger Brunswick County Literacy Council by sharing its message of hope and opportunity with the public.

STAFF PHOTO BY SUSAN USHER

knew first-hand of the agency's needs and its work. "I felt it was an area where I could fill a need," she said. "If I can find just one person who learns how to read it is worth it."

One of her current projects is coordinating volunteers involved in staging the council's second annual Bee for Literacy adult spelling bee, a fund-raising and public awareness event.

The VISTAs have also coordinated a book and plant sale and are working with the council's Calabash satellite group on an upcoming canister drive. Volunteers will be stationed at food stores countywide Aug. 2 and 3 to solicit contributions to the council.

Edith Bridger is a retired librarian, most recently employed as manager of the West Brunswick Branch

Library in Shallotte. After serving for several years on the advisory board of the literacy council, she saw the move from librarian to literacy volunteer as a natural transition.

"It's still reading," she said.

In her previous job she worked with those who could read, many of whom were avid readers. Now she works on behalf of those who are beginning to read, just realizing the power and opportunities that knowledge affords.

Brenda Grissett, who lives in Ash, had worked 17 years as a Head Start preschool teacher and thought serving as a VISTA would be "a great way to work with people, to help them."

Like many of the people she's made contact with

since starting as a VISTA in April, she really wasn't familiar with the BCLC before a friend called her attention to the VISTA opening.

"I knew about the literacy council, but I didn't really understand how it works," she said. "I didn't realize just how worthwhile a cause it is."

Since taking on the job, she says she's had "some pretty good experiences" as she tells others about the council in the Thomasboro, Longwood and Ash areas and is enthused about the council's ministry.

The more people she and the other VISTAs contact, the more non-readers the council can reach with its message of hope that they, too, can learn to read and change their lives for the better.

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