

Ready to Read

By Kevin Fritz

Literacy has the power to re-invent communities and save lives.

Imagine your life without being able to read well enough to fill out a job application. Or pinpoint an intersection on a map. Scary proposition to say the least. Unfortunately, for thousands of Central Floridians, it's an everyday reality: One in every five adults in the Orlando area reads at or below the 5th grade level.

"We don't use the word illiterate," says **Joyce L. Whidden**, executive director of the **Orlando**-based Adult Literacy League (ALL), founded in 1968. "Most people have a body of skills. We talk about functionality." She describes literacy as the ability to communicate well enough to have access to a good job, to be better parents and to lead a happier life.

"It not only affects their lives," adds **Leah Nash** of Orlando, one of 350 ALL volunteer tutors, "but their families and their communities." Nash has been working with a 38-year-old single mom who is a high-school graduate despite reading at a grammar-school level.

ALL boasts more than 425 volunteers, serving 1,000 adults a week, as well as 500 low-income pre-school children in Orange, Osceola and Seminole counties. ALL charges a one-time nominal fee per enrolling student, but sometimes that is not realistic.

"No one is denied an opportunity to be involved," Whidden says.

While the organization functions on gifts, local government funding, and individual donations, its two annual fundraisers are vital to ALL's operating budget. Each spring, the organization stages "Read Between the Wines," an intimate evening featuring a best-selling author. This year's event welcomed **Lisa See**, writer of the New York Times bestseller *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*; close to \$100,000 was raised. ALL's other fundraiser is conducted by the Orange County Bar Association, dubbed "Lawyers for Literacy Spelling Bee."

Whidden says most adults assisted by ALL have some type of learning difference, such as having difficulties with reading or writing. That's opposed to a learning disability, which can significantly interfere with the ability to learn. She says 50-70 percent of students nationally have learning differences.

Such is the case of 21-year-old **Jake Droege**, who is quite success-driven, yet has difficulties with writing. He came to ALL when he found himself having trouble with the documentation segment of his physical therapy certification classes. He had already become EMT certified and received an accounting certificate from Orlando Tech.

"Jake is an example of someone having success, but found himself struggling," says **Ron Schorsch**, 51, who had been tutoring Droege for the past five months. Adds Droege, who walked through ALL's doors a year and a half ago: "It's made a huge improvement."

Schorsch, who has been an ALL volunteer tutor for six years, says he has seen the gamut of people seeking help. A millionaire. A successful businessman. A Haitian earthquake refugee, who was so grateful for the help he received, he became an ALL tutor. Schorsch says one man had a very specific reason for seeking out ALL.

"He just wanted to learn how to write a love letter to his wife. And now he can." **L**

Jake Droege says tutoring sessions with ALL volunteer Ron Schorsch have made a huge improvement.



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For information on how to contact the Adult Literacy League (ALL), visit CentralFloridaLifestyle.com.