

Three professionals bring their skills to the RLC Board



Spring 2024 Newsletter

Racine Literacy Council
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Mike Anderson

Mike was born in Racine and has lived here most of his life. He received a Bachelor degree from the University of Wisconsin. Mike retired from his position as Chief Financial Officer for a national contractor in 2014. His career focused on construction accounting and information technology.

Mike's volunteer experience is broad. He has served the United Way of Racine County as an income tax preparer and reading tutor. He has been the treasurer and board member of the Kiwanis Youth Symphony. And aside from his new role as board member with RLC, Mike is also an animal care provider and surgical assistant at the Racine branch of the Wisconsin Humane society. He enjoys physical activity, reading and traveling with his wife, Nancy.



Tutors Michael Kania (left) and Connie Syslack (center) celebrate with their most recent graduates of an eight-week US Citizenship class at Racine Literacy.

It's Spring:

Literacy blooms in abundance

Every week, 220 people pass through the Racine Literacy Council and its satellite in the Burlington Public Library to learn and to teach.

Our spring session began in January and will conclude the first week of May. Then, we turn to assessing our students' progress. During the session, 157 students have participated in seven RLC programs – Family Literacy, English Learning, Adult Basic Education, Citizenship Preparation, Basic Computers, Know Your Government and Spanish. Sixty-three volunteer tutors have made these programs possible, and we are grateful.

This is tremendous growth for us, and as we continue to find ways to meet the needs of adults in our community who are trying to navigate the world, we depend on a growing number of volunteer tutors to help us bridge that knowledge gap. We are limited only by our numbers.

We wish to take a moment to honor all of our volunteers. It is a gift to nurture a neighbor. We applaud your compassion!



New tutor Marc Smiley (right) teaches Jaime, who learns English in the day and works in the evening.

Esmeralda Castulo Reyes

Esmeralda describes herself as a proud Mexican who embraces her heritage with joy and enthusiasm. As a bilingual individual, she says she finds immense fulfillment in bridging cultures and languages, and fostering connections wherever she goes.

She is the Dean of Students and Transition/Family Coordinator at Sonnenberg Schools, and also works at The Inclusive Bean, a coffee shop close to her heart that provides meaningful employment to teens and adults with disabilities. Her passion for diversity, equity, and inclusion fuels everything she does. Outside of work, she likes to soak up the sun during the summer and explore new food delights.



If you want to be an engaged citizen, you must understand US government

Roughly two dozen adults who attend Racine Literacy Council know more about American government, the rights afforded everyone under the U.S. Constitution and how they can play an essential role in our country's democracy.

Since this is the same civics test that students must pass in order to earn a GED diploma, adults enrolled in this spring's Adult Basic Education classes are also learning about American government and their rights. They plan to take the civics test this spring.

Volunteer instructors Connie Syslack and Michael Kania have been busy this spring helping people step into that citizenship role.

Ten students began the new year learning about American Government in a three-week seminar to learn more about the U.S. Constitution and the three branches of government.

When that class ended, 10 more Racinians wishing to become U.S. citizens enrolled in the eight-week US Citizenship course in order to prepare for the extensive citizenship test.

New Summer Classes

People looking to take the citizenship or the GED civics test can enroll in summer classes by registering online or in person at Racine Literacy Council.

Summer Citizenship class is available 6-7:30 pm, June 4-July 23.

Know Your Government will be offered 6-7:30 pm, Aug. 13-Sept. 3.

Brandon Sun

As a young adult, Brandon moved to the Racine/Kenosha area to pursue a degree in marketing and psychology at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside. After graduating college, Brandon found his way back to the higher education industry, where he is currently employed as a Success Coach at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside.

As a participant of Leadership Racine Brandon was introduced to Racine Literacy Council where he quickly found passion in serving on the Board of Directors, given his family history of coming from immigrant parents who could have benefited from Racine Literacy Council services. Brandon likes to go on outdoor adventures with his girlfriend, dog and cat.



OUR MISSION: is to provide an array of literacy services that allows Racine County residents to attain their full potential and to be engaged citizens.

OUR VISION: is that every person in Racine County has the literacy skills and confidence to live the life the dream.

Math, Reading and Civics get complete attention from students and tutors in Adult Basic Education.

Student and tutor profiles by: Madison Avila, Youth Apprentice



Eighteen months and ABE classes are flourishing

Laura Sumner Coon, Executive Director

In 2022, Racine Literacy Council was slowly climbing out of the pandemic. Since the people we serve are most likely to be essential workers and least likely to have internet connection and digital skills, many of our programs were stalled until people could safely meet in person again.

Just as our organization was regaining its momentum in early 2022, then-Executive Director Steven Mussenden died unexpectedly. Again, our programming came to a halt until we could find a replacement and emerge from this difficult time.

In August of that year, I stepped into the position of Executive Director and began to rebuild our essential services in the community, among them, our Adult Basic Education program. I turned to a friend, Nancy Margis, a former RLC board member and Racine educator who had recently retired. I explained how I wanted to build an Adult Basic Education program that could take people from where they were toward their goals to attain a GED high school diploma. Nancy quickly responded.

Within a month, she brought two other retired educators into our RLC fold, Susan DeKeuster and Polly Jahnke. The three of them collaborated with me to choose appropriate curriculum and class times and procedures, and within the month, they were teaching.

That was a mere 18 months ago. Since then, with the foundation they have helped us to create, Racine Literacy Council is an

official GED prep site. We are counseling students and preparing them for whatever academic learning they need.

For some, they simply want to improve their reading, writing and math skills. But for a growing number of adult students, attaining their GED is their goal.

We are partnering with Gateway Technical College to administer the appropriate testing and get our students to that end-goal in a way that works with their unique lives. Many of them are employed and have families. Most take classes in the evening after work. Nancy and her team – which now numbers 8 people – help to provide individualized instruction that works into our students’ lives.

In addition, another phenomenal, retired educator stepped forward, Chris Espinoza, who also leads a team of three volunteers who work with ABE students during the day. We also have some students working one-on-one with tutors.

We could not have done this work without Nancy, Sue, Polly and Chris. They have a depth of knowledge – with more than a collective 100 years of teaching experience. What a gift to RLC!

Goal GED: Tutors coach learners towards their dreams

Tutor Nancy Margis

Nancy Margis has been part of the Racine Literacy Council for 10 years. She began as a board member while she was working as an elementary teacher. Knowing that she had retired from her teaching job, Laura Sumner Coon called on Nancy in the summer of 2022 to help create a new Adult Basic Education program. At first, Nancy said she had no idea what to expect. She knew that it was going to be very different from teaching children, to which she was so accustomed. But she quickly realized how incredible such a class could be when a very close-knit community of learners emerged. They have shared the highs and lows of life together. The community is a treasure, but mostly, Nancy said she values the determination she sees in her students. “I love seeing how much they all love to learn, because that’s the difference between adults and kids; adults are there for a reason – to get things done,” she said.



Student Adriana Ibarra



Adriana Ibarra has the learning bug. It started with one-on-one lessons with a tutor to learn English. After she increased her English proficiency, she enrolled in the US Citizenship course to prepare her for the US Citizenship test, which she is scheduled to take this spring. Last February she joined the Adult Basic Education program to earn her GED. At first, she had reservations, but the fact that volunteers give up their time to share their wisdom with ABE students motivated her. “They don’t have to be there, but they always are. They stop doing their own things to be there for us,” she said. Neighbors teaching neighbors is a powerful experience. Adriana said the teachers have helped her in so many ways. She truly appreciates the structure that the tutors have created and how fun they make learning. She appreciates the way Nancy Margis explains mathematics so that it does not look as complicated anymore.



Tutor Laura Gellott

For 38 years, Dr. Laura Gellott taught European history to college students, most recently at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside before retiring. But she wasn’t done teaching. Last September, Laura joined the team of volunteer tutors who collectively lead the Adult Basic Education program at the Racine Literacy Council. She quickly realized that the work was similar – students want to learn and she wants to “meet the students where they are at and move them two or three levels up.” Every week, Laura works with a group of mainly Latina women that have strong conversational English skills but want to strengthen their abilities to write and read as well. Laura is impressed with her group’s motivation and determination to learn, especially how fast they move through the subjects. “I hope they enjoy the class as much as I do,” she said.



Student Angelica Gonzalez



When Angelica first arrived in this country, she was looking for a place that offered English classes. But as a mother who did not know how to drive, it was difficult for her to find a convenient place – until she discovered the Racine Literacy Council. For several years, she worked with a tutor in a small class to learn English. Having acquired good English skills, she enrolled in the Adult Basic Education class. “You might think, ‘Oh, why do I need to learn this? I’m never going to use it,’” she said. “But for me, it is useful and I value it because I know it now.” English and Adult Basic Education classes have significantly impacted Angelica’s work life. “I am now able to understand the people around me. I can also explain and defend myself, as well as others.”