

Illiteracy Robs Us All

by Oneyedjack

That's a statement we should all think about—on a daily basis. Last week I threw some numbers out for your reading pleasure, though many of you know—or have an idea—just what illiteracy costs us, it's good to have a reminder now and again.

Illiteracy weakens a community, and we all are the worse for it. Illiteracy robs an individual of his or her chance at participation within the greater community and leads to lack of self-esteem, social skills, as well as—for many—the ability to earn a decent living. Illiteracy is a silent thief, hidden in plain sight; stealing the future from those who can least afford it.

Philadelphia loses almost one-half of its school kids to that trash heap known euphemistically as "drop-out." (And those are the numbers they admit to—who knows what the real numbers are?) In viewing the report that I mentioned in last week's column, one readily sees a host of underperforming kids who somehow managed—in spite of not being able to read—to make it to a higher grade (mostly 8th); at which point, they turn 16 and quit school.

Then, these self-same kids become adults with no job skills, and seemingly no future; save perhaps jail. For many of our city's kids, jail is becoming increasingly, the potential career path. A recent nationwide study finds that 1 in every 100 Americans is in jail and Pennsylvania leads the way in the Northeast.

Bucking the trend

In an imposing old stone school building at the corner of Frankford and Somerset there are some folks deeply committed to education. Not only does this building still serve an educational purpose; housing Head Start, as well as the Willard Elementary School-Somerset Annex and the Community Women's Education Project, it is also home

K-BEAT

The Kensington Beat

to the Community Learning Center—an adult literacy and education project with the stated motto of: *Changing Lives through Literacy.*

Since 1987, CLC has served more than 5,000 adult and teen learners and now serves upwards of 300 annually. As stated on their web site: "CLC fosters personal growth, economic self-sufficiency and the pursuit of life-long learning."

I spent some time last week with CLC Associate Director Carol Miller and Leigh Anne Scarborough who is an adult basic education teacher; and also trained as a teacher of English for speakers of other languages. In addition to the site at Frankford and Somerset CLC also works within the Mann Older Adult Center at 5th and Allegheny, the Maria de los Santos Health Center and another site in Center City at 1617 JFK Blvd.

Carol has a wealth of stories about her experience within the adult education field, personal and emotional. In listening to some of the more poignant anecdotes of the adult students—as related by Carol—"I want to be able to read to my grandchildren;" or, "I need you to help me understand percentages, so that I can understand my bills," it becomes readily apparent that there are a lot of people out there thirsting for knowledge.

CLC takes a holistic approach to what it is they do—and obviously do well—not only in the preparation and presentation of their lesson plans but also the reward/diversion aspect as embodied in the field trips that are organized for their students. The students visit places like the

Camden Aquarium, Pennsylvania Ballet dress rehearsals, the Franklin Mint and elsewhere. With a social worker on staff, these field trips also serve a dual purpose; the entertainment educational feature, but most importantly, life skills building.

For Carol Miller, Leigh Anne Scarborough and the rest of the staff of CLC it is readily apparent they embody the credo that *"Educating adults is just as important as educating children since the behaviors modeled by adults trickle down to the smaller people."*

I admire and respect the work being done by these folks; it is one of those seemingly thankless—save for the personal satisfaction—activities which happen throughout our neighborhood and go largely unnoticed for the most part. We tend to not notice our community gems like the CLC and others; what we notice are the drop-outs, the kids wandering lost and at cross purposes.

It would be nice if we could educate our children while they were children and not have to expend the effort when they are adults. There will always be those adults—newly arrived citizens and speakers of another language—who need to use these services which CLC provides; but for crying out loud: why don't we educate our kids when they are kids?

And there is no way that anyone can convince me that there is no correlation between the lack of education in this country and the fact that 1 in every 100 Americans is in jail. A tip of the Oneyedjack cap to the folks at the Community Learning Center over here in the neighborhood. And by the way, Carol and staff are always looking for volunteers for administrative support, readers, writers and storytellers; come on down and help out.

www.communitylearningcenter.org
or 215 426-7940.