



Council committed to overcoming illiteracy in White County

By **KYLIE AKINS**
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As 14 percent of White County functions without the ability to read or write, many of them quickly learn to cope in every aspect of their life. They develop techniques to fake literacy and become skilled at reading everything but the letters that are so foreign to them. These people often have families and successful careers but have never learned how to read. One man living such a life came to the White County Literacy Council at the age of 66 and declared, "I've finally decided enough is enough. I'm going to learn how to read."

The Literacy Council was organized 33 years ago by several women who chose to address the problem of illiteracy in the county. After a period of activity and growth upon their founding in Searcy, the Council began to deteriorate as the women aged or moved on to other pursuits. Foothills took up the Literacy Council until the school became Arkansas State University in Searcy and their teaching load grew to be too heavy to support it.

At that point, the Searcy Library took over the Council and hired a part-time director to oversee the proj-

ect. Ann Nieto became the director about five years ago and is still working to keep the organization running.

"My old college motto was 'you learn to do by doing,'" Nieto said. "That was literally the case. I took workshops, I went to conventions and meetings and tried to observe as much as I could. And of course the best way to learn about the actual teaching is to do it. That's why I have been grateful for my abundant supply of students."

The council exists to serve the 3,500 to 4,000 people in the county who are unable to read and write. Nieto said she was once unaware of the number of people who are illiterate in her own community and is now dedicated to teaching those who desire to learn.

"We don't think about it in Searcy because of the college and our decent school systems, but there are many, many people out there that can't read or write; every aspect of one's life is affected by the ability or inability to read," Nieto said. "We cannot make people come to us. Anybody who walks through our door, we give our service to them, no charge."

Nieto reported that many of her students are immigrants classified as English as

a Second Language students. She said she is happy to teach anyone who is willing to learn, but the council has received criticism for that choice.

"If you look at it, it just doesn't make any sense, because if people are going to be better off if they know how to speak our language," Nieto said. "Everybody is going to be better off if they know how to speak our language. So the very idea that just because they can't speak our language we shouldn't teach them to speak our language makes no sense whatsoever."

Nieto described the 14 current tutors as retired teachers, house wives and empty-nesters with the desire to do something productive with their time, and others are those who are so blessed that they do not have to work and now wish to give back to the community. The Literacy Council was also granted an Americore volunteer, 1980 Harding graduate Melinda LaFavers. Nieto said she used to have Harding students as tutors, but when they left for break or graduation, their students were left behind without a teacher.

The Literacy Council's desire is for each tutor to complete a level of teaching with their student before

either leaves the learning process. Nieto stressed that each student learns at his or her own pace, and a tutor must have patience, creativity and a satisfaction from teaching. Currently there are about 33 students who on average come in for two one-hour sessions a week.

"I would like to see us grow in terms of reaching more people to teach and training tutors so they can teach those students," Nieto said. "At the same time, we can't force people to do it. We have to accept those who come to us, and we want to be able to welcome them with open arms and offer them our services."

The current location for the Literacy Council also serves as a second-hand book store, stocked with used books donated by the community to help fund the organization. Nieto said she always welcomes any donation of sellable books.

"Our new board member is telling me that I will have to be ruthless and get rid of things that are not selling," Nieto said. "And I know he's right because our space is so limited. But that just kills me, because I am just so fond of history, literature, humanities that it just hurts me to think about recycling those books."

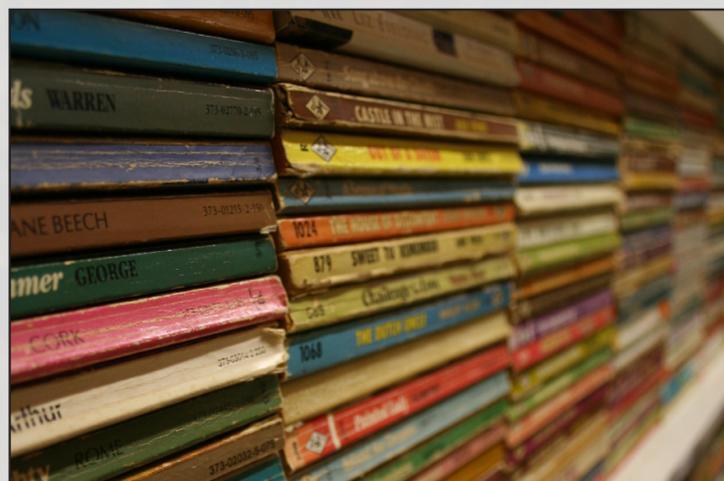
Joyce Turley, Searcy

library regional manager for the White County regional library system, has personally seen the effects of illiteracy on one's life as she has encountered people who were unable to read or write. To her, literacy helps a person experience a productivity and self-worth one would otherwise be unable to attain if he or she continued to be limited by illiteracy.

"Any person that is dedicated to seeing that these illiterate people learn to read is fulfilling a great need," Turley said.

Nieto said she hopes that more people will hear of the Literacy Council and come to it with the desire to be taught to read and write. She expressed how important literacy is in a country dependent on its language for so many aspects of life.

"It affects your education, political and health knowledge and understanding," Nieto said. "If you can't read your prescription and you can't remember what the doctor said, that's a problem. It affects their spiritual development because I believe the Bible is the word of God, and if you can't read that word, then it's going to affect you. Our mission is to reach out and teach adults how to read and write English."



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