Pawcatuck – Throughout his life James Arruda Henry worked as a baker, a cement block maker, a handyman, and lobsterman. After learning to read and write in his nineties, this 98 year old is trying his hand as published author.

His book, a collection of short stories from his life called “In a Fisherman’s Language,” sold out its first printing in just a week and a half, and well before the official book signing. An earlier date for an unofficial signing had to be set to meet the demand. With the arrival of a larger second printing of the book, published by Fowler Road Press, the family is uncertain how they will be able to keep up with the orders they are currently fulfilling through a small office in Alicia Smith’s home in Pawcatuck, one of Henry’s granddaughters.

Already Henry has gotten offers by two New York filmmakers, an audio book company, and a request from a teacher in Massachusetts to speak to his young students to help encourage them to learn to read. The response has been overwhelming for both Henry and his family. “I was just a fisherman. No one seemed to care, one way or another, about me,” Henry says. “Now, they all look up to me, and I feel that I’m wanted.”

Born of a Portuguese immigrant family, Henry was taken out of school several times by his father and put to work to help sustain the family. With only a third grade education he had to learn how to survive in a world completely obscured by the written word.

“I never thought I could climb the hill, but I’m on top of the hill now,” says Henry.

Embarrassed by his illiteracy, Henry learned to use tricks to avoid having to read throughout his life. In restaurants, for example, he would simply listen to what others were ordering for something he liked and ask for what they were having.

In spite of his inability to read and write, the retired fisherman was able to learn several jobs with proficiency. Henry was a skilled plumber and carpenter and worked as a handyman. He served in the National Guard and worked at Electric Boat. He helped found the annual Blessing of the Fleet and ran it for many years.

At 91 and in a time of despair, he became inspired after learning about the story of George Dawson, the grandson of a slave who at 98 learned to read and write and went on to earn his high school diploma. Henry says he continues to read Dawson’s book, “Life is So Good,” even now. He says he gains something new every time. He says he’s on his third reading of the book.

“Instead of sitting in the corner, I might as well learn to read and write,” asserts Henry.

Along his side, Henry had his two granddaughters, Alicia Smith and Marlisa McLaughlin, and their families helping and encouraging him. Academy Point, the elderly housing project where he currently resides, sought out Mark Hogan, a retired East Lyme English teacher and volunteer at Literary Volunteers of Eastern Connecticut, to come three times a week to work with Henry. Together they have helped Henry accomplish a goal very few thought possible.

McLaughlin says she knows what drives him, “He’s very demanding, but in a good way. He’s very innovative. He designed his own desk to work with his wheelchair and clips to pull up his socks.”

McLaughlin has become a tireless advocate on behalf of her grandfather and the elderly. She is hoping to use part of the book website to create a resource for those caring for the elderly, everything from which adult diapers to use to common illnesses the elderly face to which brand of walkers to use. She believes this knowledge would be able to help other families to be able to care for their elderly with compassion.

The official book signing is set for Sunday, December 18, at Academy Point in the Benchmark regional office in Mystic, a technology-learning center for seniors. The book is currently available for purchase at www.fishermanslanguage.com.