Adult Illiteracy in Nashville

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Social concepts such as literacy and poverty are integrally tied to their labels. Like jelly and sand, they are without intrinsic shape, defined and redefined by the vessels that hold them.
Richard L. Venezky – Introduction to *Toward Defining Literacy*

Richard Venezky's observation highlights the Sisyphean task engaging educators, scholars, policy makers, and citizens of progressive societies who seek to find a meaningful, working definition for a concept that the word *literacy* strains to hold. The issues surrounding that concept are evolving, complex, and multivalent; barring a newly dark Age, those issues will likely continue to outpace static capture.

The purpose of this paper is not to investigate pedagogically the definition of the word, literacy, as Dr. Venezky did so well in his 1990 book, referenced above in the epigraph. His fully considered definition starts, "Literacy denotes a collection of abilities within which specific ability zones can be designated for practical ends." and ends 350 words later with, "What are needed are higher competency levels, and higher levels of literacy are a required underpinning" (72-73): bookends for a wealth and diversity of thought from an expert in the field.

Neither is the purpose of this paper to prove that illiteracy is a problem in Nashville. This was ably demonstrated by the March 2010 *Community Needs Assessment for Adult Literacy* (CNAAL), commissioned by Dollar General and presented to Nashville Mayor, Karl Dean, with recommendations for prospective action. Along with a short, "more current definition of an adult who is illiterate [i.e.] one who cannot read or cannot comprehend what he/she reads above an eighth-grade level," are

these cited statistics from the *National Assessment of Adult Literacy* (NAAL) for Nashville and beyond: “An estimated 52,000 (or 1 out of every 8) people 16 years or older in Davidson County [are not] able to read. At the state level…13 percent, or 577,000 Tennesseans 16 years or older were estimated to be illiterate. Nationally, 30 million American adults can perform only rudimentary literacy tasks, and 21 million have limited literacy skills that impede their full participation in American life. In addition, 11 million immigrants and refugees in the U.S. cannot speak English well enough to perform minimal tasks of prose literacy” (5-6).

Nor is the purpose of this paper to argue in support of one solution against another, or even to consider whether a solution to this problem is possible at this time, under present circumstances. Inside the narrow focus of this project, certain concessions must obtain - Stipulated: illiteracy is a problem. Stipulated: the problem of illiteracy has moral, economic, health-related and national security implications. Stipulated: there is no strategy, currently in place in Nashville, which will solve the problem of illiteracy by a date certain.

This paper includes firsthand reports from six Nashvillians whose lives and work have intersected with those of their illiterate neighbors. The goal of this paper is to have their reflections, each coming from a slightly different angle, coalesce here to reveal a hidden reality; to make the invisible visible; and then for the reader to consider with new eyes whether or not the stipulations above were too hastily drawn.

Each of the six agreed to a recorded conversation without hesitation; each was gracious with their time, an hour or slightly over; and each spoke candidly and

answered questions directly; each was also given an opportunity to review, clarify, or correct any derivative in this paper with its origin in their words. The six interviews were captured by digital recorder and my transcriptions were made using Express Scribe NCH Software with audio playback controls; each was formatted and edited for readability and all are included as Appendices numbered 1- 6.

Four of the six conversations are directly on point to Adult Literacy in Nashville and summaries of those four, highlighting key points, are arranged as follows:

1. Hunter Schimpff, having spent the better part of the previous year as Adult Literacy Coordinator in the Mayor's Office of Children and Youth, establishes a current, Metropolitan, administrative context with his view from "20,000 feet."

2. and 3. From the Nashville Adult Literacy Council (NALC), according to the *Community Needs Assessment for Adult Literacy*, March 2010 Report, the largest provider of adult basic education in Davidson County (6), Meg Nugent, Executive Director, and Sarah Coode, Literacy Specialist, talk about their county-wide Adult Basic Literacy program as frontline operatives: each has 20 years of experience in adult basic literacy training as both volunteer tutor and salaried professional.

4. Kim Murdoch-Smith is a Metro Nashville Public School (MNPS) teacher at the Adult High School in the Cohn Adult Learning Center: she has 5 years there in the A+ Learning Lab and 30 years teaching in the Metro system; her background is in English and Social Studies. The Adult High School offers a wide range of

adult students over the age of 18 a chance to earn a MNPS High School Diploma; it is not a GED Program;

Appendices 5 and 6 are not treated directly, but have been included because of their supporting relevance to the issue of adult literacy in Nashville.

5. Jeannie Sharp, an MNPS teacher at Charlotte Park Elementary, has a 28-year background in Special Education, working directly with children in the classroom. As Ms. Coode said in the first hundred words she spoke, "Most of our learners who were born in the United States are from Special Ed. backgrounds. Sometimes they know their specific diagnosis…sometimes they don't know why they didn't learn to read as a child" (Appx 3, p1). Ms. Sharp's account provides current information and insight from inside the Special Education program to illuminate the connection.

6. Maxine Kelly is Grant's Manager in the Department of Psychology at Vanderbilt. Ms. Kelly's background includes work in the Canadian school system with children and families, and work in South Florida recruiting single parents and displaced homemakers without basic educational skills for training in the adult education program; she is a native Spanish speaker with vivid memories of learning to read English and has a continued interest in being a part of the adult basic education effort. Her experiences show the similarities of circumstances and shared challenges of illiterate or semi-literate adults in a wider context.

To these I have added a personal experience as a literacy tutor as well as my thoughts in summary. Starting then, with Mr. Schimpff:

Hunter Schimpff: A Local View from 20,000 Feet

> Policymakers and providers consistently observe that adult education and literacy issues are often left out or marginalized in the greater discussion around education policy….a citywide education strategy without an adult education component risks creating a forgotten class of adults forever alienated from our workforce, our civic life, and our city's future economic prosperity. *A Community Needs Assessment for Adult Literacy* (13)

The Basis for Action:

The *Community Needs Assessment for Adult Literacy* (CNAAL) was released in March of 2010. Commissioned by the Dollar General Literacy Foundation, the report is based on extensive interviews with key players and advocates working inside Metro Government, outside in the private business sector, and throughout the Nashville community. Data specific to Metro Nashville and its surrounding counties was collected and combined with that found in relevant state and national studies to provide a picture of " the current state of adult literacy and high school attainment in Nashville, its implications for projected future job growth and worker salaries, and an overview of the service provider landscape" (4).

The CNAAL made three primary recommendations; first among them was to "identify a central coordinating entity for adult education and literacy services in Davidson County" (14). As a direct result, and more directly here to the relevancy of Mr. Schimpff's remarks on the subject, "Mayor Dean created a position in the Mayor's Office of Children and Youth [MOCY] in partnership with the Dollar General Foundation to work on adult literacy and help coordinate the efforts of the many non-profits working on adult literacy every day in Nashville-Davidson County." Mr. Schimpff held that position

from December of 2010 to October 5, 2011; at the time of this writing, an active email link remains on the MOCY webpage to contact Mr. Schimpff under his former title as Adult Literacy Coordinator (Nashville.gov/mocy).

Mr. Schimpff and I met and talked candidly about adult literacy in Nashville at a local restaurant on October 6, 2011. This was a unique opportunity to speak with the former Adult Literacy Coordinator on the day after he transitioned out of that position.

His views were his own and reflected his recent experience; an edited transcription of our conversation is included as Appendix 1 and serves both as background and source for Mr. Schimpff's insights, views, and quoted remarks laid out in the paragraphs that follow.

During our conversation, Mr. Schimpff offered his thoughts on the issues as he had seen them from his vantage point at 20,000 feet. As we talked, he touched on a number of key points: the lack of coordination among service providers and the enormous need for services still out there; attitudes in the state legislature toward the literacy problem and their effect on allocation of government funding; the cross-over impact illiteracy has on individual and system-wide healthcare; the need for Family Literacy Programs; and the critical need for much greater community involvement as our best bet for alleviating a problem that will likely remain unsolved.

According to Mr. Schimpff:

The MOCY functions as Mayor Dean's Education Policy Office for Nashville, Davidson County, doing the groundwork necessary to guide future planning and decisions on how best to improve connections among adult education/literacy providers

including Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS), active community organizations and local non-profits, working daily toward the same end, but separated by certain barrier realities both fiscal and procedural.

> When non-profits are established, they operate within a certain structure, one they become used to. Also their funding streams are tied to what they do; so for somebody to come in and say, 'Could you tweak this element, or maybe work with this organization?' the immediate reaction is, 'I don't know about that.' You get out the data, show them the picture, lay out the reasoning, and give them some time. They'll say, "OK, *maybe* that works.' It's not an overnight deal; it's a long, persistent challenge that is still, frankly, going on. (3)

Across the board organizational silos, time constraints, and the degree of difficulty notwithstanding, the Mayor's personal focus and the creation of the Adult Literacy Coordinator position mark a turning point and major step forward for Nashville, as distinguished from many other cities where the issue of illiteracy is "one of those things that live in a dark closet that you don't want to deal with" (4).

> City and State officials are primarily concerned with economic development; that's what gets votes; that's basically why they're in office. They are supposed to continue the pace of economic development in a city. You hear all sorts of other things: education's tied to that; environmental issues are tied to that; but, at the end of the day, it comes

> down to jobs; it comes down to the success of businesses, and adult literacy is a key issue to that. (4)

Businesses must have access to a quality labor force to operate successfully. Businesses keen to expand or relocate to Nashville will find our otherwise prevailingly favorable cost of living differential negatively counterbalanced by a high rate of adult illiteracy; existing businesses realize less now in productivity than they would otherwise with a better educated workforce. It is obviously to our advantage to reduce that rate to the extent possible, even if the larger issues remain unsolved.

Quality of life is also an issue; “look at other cities around the nation that have more educated populations; you could very much argue that their crime rates are lower; their standard of living is higher. And literacy is a core foundation for all that” (5).

> Nashville’s big competitor cities are Boston and Charlotte. They’re about the same size; their government budgets are about the same; but, Nashville is behind both in terms of educated populations. Looking at percentage of the city with a Bachelor’s and above and percentage of the city with a High-School Diploma and above, Nashville is behind both of those cities. We’re also behind D.C, New York, and Seattle, but those are on a different scale; they’re much larger cities. Within Tennessee, though, Nashville is more competitive; our numbers are better than Memphis. (6)

Going forward, increased collaboration among providers will be a most effective approach. The ball is starting to roll but the inefficiencies of a segmented, group and sub-group effort continue to hold us back. Larger waiting lists demonstrate increased

need and increased need leads to increased funding for individual providers; this "sense of mission and self-preservation" (7) among providers is completely understandable but less effective than a coordinated effort and overshadowed by the need to serve more people.

> If you look at the Davidson County statistics, we're only touching about 4% of the need. So we're not [suggesting that organizations begin] stealing people from other organizations, let's be clear about that; we're not stealing your GED student, so let's not get into a turf battle over this; 96% is still out there and they're coming in the door every day. That was something that I really tried to emphasize. But again, elements of that still exist; they're going to continue to exist; there are reasons for that. (7)

At the governmental level, Tennessee, as a state, puts a relatively small amount of money into its adult education budget relative even to what Metro Nashville, as a city, puts into its K-12 budget. For example, Tennessee addresses a statewide need exceeding 100,000 adults by funding at a rate of "$373 per student served" (8). Metro Schools accommodate an 86,000 student, K-12 need at a little over 21 times that rate or around "8 or $9,000 per pupil served" (8). Other states do more; so could Tennessee. "These federal funds come through under the Workforce Investment Act, which requires a minimum 25% state match; Tennessee matches the minimum" (8).

> There is resistance in American society, reflected in the State Legislature that goes something like this: 'Well, they had their chance, you know; they went to high-school; they went to the Public Schools for 9 years, 10 years, 11 years; they had their chance then and they shouldn't have been

> messing around.' You'll hear that because it's out there; we're having a very frank conversation. And I would say that viewpoint is a bit limited. I think, if you really understood the circumstances of poverty, you might not say something like that. There are state senators who believe that: the sense that you had your chance. But from a state perspective, I see it really as an investment in the quality of your workforce. If not here, then we pay for it somewhere else. For example, with low literacy rates comes a correspondingly low level in health literacy. (9)

People without developed literacy skills face additional barriers when they need medical care. Navigating the health care system is challenging for anyone; added burdens of emotional stress in a crisis and the need to quickly decipher important new information transmitted in medical jargon make it difficult at best even for well-educated individuals to cope. Medical emergencies force illiterate adults to reveal their inability to read to others, to adult family members and even to their children, causing very real embarrassment and shame. It is easy to see why educated, literate individuals are much more likely to have better health outcomes.

Under use, over use, and misuse of the health care systems significantly impact the overall cost and dilution of services; TennCare and Medicare costs continue to rise. "When you add up instances like these across an uneducated population, the cost becomes staggering…. That's why reading and literacy is such a fundamental cornerstone to someone's ability to function in society" (10-11).

Illiteracy is also very much a family issue; there is a need for more Family Literacy Programs. We have, for example, the Martha O'Bryan Center in East Nashville

offering “a GED Class along with Early Childhood where you get some crossover between parents and children” and St. Luke’s in the 37209, West Nashville area. (16)

> I think people don’t understand this really in depth: the implications of an individual not being able to read. If you talk to Judge Betty Green, who is a Juvenile Court Judge, she’ll tell you she doesn’t know individuals coming through her court, she knows *families*. That’s because illiterate parents pass illiteracy down to their children and *their* children; it’s generational. So if you’re talking about breaking the cycle of poverty and breaking the cycle of illiteracy, it’s got to start somewhere, either Early Childhood programs, a parent; or, there are some Family Literacy Programs that have very successful models nationally; but the point is, from a funder’s perspective, Family Literacy is an amazing approach in that you’re getting two for one. You’re paying one time to help educate the parent and the child. [Currently] there are not many family literacy approaches because we have fragmented our programs. (15-16)

Nashville has become a resettlement city, “the 5th largest resettlement city in America.” Percentages change, of course, and new ethnicities arrive: “the Kurdish have come, the Somali’s have come…10% of Davidson County is now Latino” (18). These new Nashville residents, along with the American-born, Nashville citizens who also cannot read and write English proficiently, live in a different world. The educated, affluent population lacks an understanding of the problems their illiterate neighbors face on a daily basis and also what kind of impact in aggregate they are having on the community as a whole. This kind of disconnect may be one of the reasons there are not

more basic literacy programs operating in the city: “Because the community doesn’t understand that [illiteracy] is a real problem” (19). It’s not that we can’t mobilize support or recruit volunteers to teach and to train others to teach:

> It gets into cost - if we’re going to try to fund all these literacy programs, we’re never going to find enough money in the world to do it, but if we can get our communities, on their own, to be literacy teachers and literacy advocates, I think we’ll get an exponential multiplying effect. (20)

Mr. Schimpff’s Final Thoughts

The ball is rolling: slowly. Steps have been taken and some momentum has been generated among the service providers toward better collaboration. Someone will be hired to fill his former position as Literacy Coordinator and whether or not the change will have a negative impact on the progress that’s been made to improve the skills of those people at the lowest literacy levels depends on the person who accepts the position.

During the previous 9 months at the mayor’s office, the focus was on encouraging adults who already have some education but failed to complete their programs to go back and get credentials: GED, AA, or BA. “Because, again…it’s about economic competitiveness. Going forward, the focus will possibly be even more skewed toward the not-finished population” (13). Increasing the percentage of credentialed individuals among the Nashville workforce is good for business and good for the city.

> In my personal world view, my political view, I don’t put a lot of faith in politics and the politicians to solve our community and social problems. I think the American people are much better at dealing with solutions to

> those. I think for-profit businesses and non-profit businesses are more effective catalysts.
>
> Though few and far between, we do get political leaders gifted with a skill set. But I see successful politicians as people balancing the social contract, and to the extent that they can do that, harmoniously, through their 4 years, 6 years; that's success. I think you're asking a lot of a political leader to go beyond the balance to keep the peace, because, having been in Mayor Dean's office, he has his hands full balancing the social contract. So, to get movement, to actually see change, to see it start to affect families and parents, I think the greater catalyst will come from somewhere in the community. (22-23)

Mr. Schimpff supported his assertion with a suitably ironic quote from Winston Churchill: "You can always count on Americans to do the right thing – after they've tried everything else" (20).

Meg Nugent: The Nashville Adult Literacy Council

> **Mission:** Our vision is for all to learn and for all to help build a community of adults empowered through literacy. – NALC Webpage

The Nashville Adult Literacy Council (NALC) is a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization dedicated to teaching reading to U.S.-born adults and English skills to adult immigrants; it is the largest program of its kind in Davidson County; the main office is inside the Cohn Adult Learning Center, just off Charlotte Avenue in West Nashville, where it has been since 1982. Ms. Meg Nugent and I met in her office there and talked candidly about adult literacy, on October 24, 2011. Her long term association with NALC allows her to reflect on events and experiences over two decades and gives her a unique perspective on the ups, downs, challenges and triumphs in the small local world of adult literacy education: her continued enthusiasm and passion for her work were evident as we talked.

Ms. Nugent is a past director of the Tennessee Literacy Coalition (TLC) and currently chairs their Board of Directors. She was a volunteer tutor at NALC during the 10 years from 1990 until she accepted her current position as Executive Director in 2000. During our conversation, Ms. Nugent touched on a number of key points: efforts to meet the increasing needs of the growing immigrant population in Davidson County, which includes attracting and retaining volunteer tutors; the entrenched nature of the problem of illiteracy; the changing infrastructure of key programs supporting NALC learners as they go forward; the need for additional resources in terms of dollars and technology; the successes of learners; support for tutors; appreciation for funders and

the dedication of her staff. An edited transcription of our conversation is included as Appendix 2 and serves as both background and source for Ms. Nugent's insights, views, and quoted remarks laid out in the paragraphs that follow.

Although the Nashville Adult Literacy Council has a new and improved webpage found at nashvilleliteracy.com, tracking shows, as might be expected given the demographic, that most prospective learners find out about them by word-of-mouth; prospective volunteers are attracted by the "almost constant ads" run locally on NPR, and seen on Graffiti Indoor Advertising; NALC is also found on all the generic volunteer lists maintained by organizations like Hands On Nashville, Giving Matters, and the United Way 2-1-1 helpline.

Even so, the number of volunteer tutors decreased over the last year despite best efforts. Some contributing factors are these: for example, unlike one-time-only volunteering, where people show up at their child's school to rake leaves or clean up on a Saturday and then go home, tutoring is a regular weekly commitment over an extended period of time; not everybody has the time or is comfortable with this kind of arrangement. Too, people who dismiss the opportunity to do this work without giving it a try, thinking perhaps that prior teaching experience is required, may not realize that tutor training and support is provided by NALC staff, nor consider how much they will benefit from the experience. "We have volunteers all the time that say they think they learn more than their learners" (4).

Aside from the U.S.-born basic literacy students, the program also struggles to meet the needs of the English Language Learners flooding into Nashville from all parts

of the world. Since the March 2010 Report, *A Community Needs Assessment for Adult Literacy,* was published, NALC opened the Antioch office, just off Murfreesboro Road in Southeast Davidson County, "based on the increase in size and need of the immigrant population in that area" (3). The need for literacy tutors is ongoing and expanding:

> In some ways that's the nature of the beast for a program like ours: a volunteer literacy program. Every program in the country is having the same issue right now, or almost all. These last few years, the demand has been so much greater than usual; you never have enough tutors, but especially now. We spend all our time trying to recruit tutors and train them and match them to learners, but it's just never enough. (3)

Embedded in the very nature of the problem of illiteracy are also two contributing factors. Firstly, the problem is invisible to the wider community; "You're never going to have people raising their hands saying, 'I don't know how to read'…. Not only are people not going to admit it, they're going to extraordinary lengths to hide it so that you'll never know it" (6). Secondly, among the wider literate community, few people not directly involved in literacy work are aware that a significant portion of our city's adult population cannot read and write nor do they appreciate what life is like for an adult trying to make a life and a living in Nashville without those abilities.

> Illiteracy is not like other social issues; you can see that someone's on drugs or committing crimes or whatever; in cases of domestic abuse you can see bruises, maybe not always, but it's more visible. Think about it; you know people don't like to admit they have a drug problem and they

> don’t admit they’re being abused, and if someone doesn’t know how to read, the shame is probably greater than the other two. (6)

It takes great courage for an adult who can’t read or write to come to terms with that; to admit it to themselves, to make a decision to do something about it, and then to admit it to others by coming in the door and asking for help.

> We should all have respect for that; I could tell you horror stories people have shared with me about how terrified they are when they first come here. I can’t imagine having that much courage. The adults that grew up in our country and never learned to read have spent all of their lives hiding it. You know how it is once you're an adult, longstanding habits don’t break easily; we’re hard headed. (5)

There are many factors pushing people to learn to read and write or to improve if they have made a start in that direction. But, “we already know that the main reasons people come to us are job related; the top two are job related: to get a job or to get a promotion, get a better job; and the third is so they can learn how to help their children with school and homework or whatever else they need” (15). This third reason is key long term: “enabling parents to teach their children or help their children learn to read is making sure that it doesn’t happen all over again; illiteracy tends to be passed down generationally” (16).

When learners have raised their reading skills to a level where they can be successful in a GED setting and are ready to take that step, there is a need to help them find GED classes. This has become problematic for a couple of reasons recently:

"the huge increase in the number of learners and the whole business about the changes in contracting GED providers" (9). The federal government provides funds for GED through the state and out to local programs by contract. Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) held the contract for many years and were at one time offering as many as 30 classes across the county. "The GED contract has changed hands three times in three years here in Nashville….The net result has been a decrease in programs"(9). Another possible next step for learners who want to earn a MNPS High School Diploma is the Adult High School program, also housed in the Cohn Adult Learning Center.

In a program like NALC there are always challenges associated with funding and volunteer tutors. There are also other specific needs as well: there is the continuous need to keep up with technology: computer hardware and teaching software; the need to buy books: "we spend about $40,000 a year on books;" the need to stay current with staff salaries; and the need to "figure out ways to serve more people with the same amount of resources" (21). For another example:

> We have a new project: we were one of two programs in the country selected to be on a grant with a national program for citizenship, so we've created 9 citizenship classes in Nashville. It was a planning and capacity-building grant and we want to keep moving forward with that; we spent all this time getting things up and running, so we want to keep those 9 classes; you'd hate to say it was all for nothing. (21)

On the wish list side, the program could use 200,000 more dollars and more volunteers. The projected budget for the next fiscal year is "a little more ambitious than

it's been in past years…if we do [reach it] it will just be meeting our needs; it won't be jumping ahead" (21). "But one thing I will say: I'm super proud of everyone that works here; something we're really good at as an organization is stretching our money and making do with a little" (22). Most of the NALC funding goes directly into the program. "We're proud of that. It's not official until we put out our 990 and audit, but I think we are at 3.6% cost in management/administration vs. program" (9).

"We're a small enough town that all of us in the literacy effort can work together with our funders on fundamental issues; I think we're just lucky" (24) NALC has been supported with dollars and more by an excellent core group of funders consistently over many years: Dollar General , United Way, Memorial Foundation, HCA, and the Scarlett Foundation; there is also the Center for Non-Profit Management (Nashville), "a low cost resource to help us do our jobs" (24).

When asked to reflect on her program's triumphs, Meg said, "I think what the learners get out of it is what it's all about here.

Sarah Coode: Literacy Specialist

> Some people there are who, being grown, forget the horrible task of learning to read. It is perhaps the greatest single effort that the human undertakes….For a thousand thousand years these humans have existed and they have only learned this trick – this magic – in the final ten thousand of the thousand thousand.
>
> John Steinbeck – Introduction to *The Acts of King Arthur and his Noble Knights*

Ms. Sarah Coode (pronounced Cōd) is the Literacy Specialist at the Nashville Adult Literacy Council (NALC); her office is in the Cohn Adult Learning Center at 4805 Park Avenue, in West Nashville. On October 26, 2011, Ms. Coode and I met and talked candidly about adult literacy training. Over the course of an hour, she shared her thoughts on the work she does so enthusiastically, and told of her experiences with a few of the many people she has tutored and trained to tutor over the past two decades. Her dedication, positive demeanor, and conscientious approach were evident as we talked.

Ms. Coode works in direct contact with those she supports: collaboratively with the tutors, and as instructor/advisor/facilitator with the learners. She was a volunteer tutor for 8 years and has been on staff now over 10. She is well placed to show the human side of the NALC program. During our conversation, she covered some of the key points in the program and the learning process from her up-close and personal perspective: assessment and enrollment; student goals met; the disconnect between the problem of illiteracy and a wider interest in the solution; the need to focus on reading in the first three grades in school; and timelines for learning. An edited transcription of our conversation is included as Appendix 3 and serves both as background and source

for Ms. Coode's insights, views, and quoted remarks laid out in the paragraphs that follow.

Entering the NALC Program as a learner

Interested adults, 18 and over, are required to come in for an hour or so to an orientation to learn about the program. During that time they hear about the Orton-Gillingham based approach with its phonetic skills, its decoding skills, its concept of 42 sounds in English; they see the materials and the facility. They learn they will be required to sign a letter of commitment, which lays out their responsibilities in the classroom, informs them that they will be expected to do homework, notes that they will be taught by volunteer tutors and reinforces that they will be expected to put forth considerable effort to take part in the program.

> We encourage students to expect that all of their homework and practice will be on the subject they've chosen. So yes, maybe "au" and "aw" both make the sound /aw/ like in the words *August* and *awful*. But this student's bringing in his commercial driver's license book or his church bulletin or whatever he or she wants to read and I'm showing them here's that sound and spelling in these words that you want to read: maybe it's a cookbook, maybe it's a newspaper.
>
> We're trying to take these reading skills and put them directly into their lives today, so they'll be reading and writing things they want to be reading and writing about while they're learning specific reading skills. (18)

Learners wishing to take the next step have to demonstrate their desire to do so by calling back after they've had time to consider what they've heard. Probably 80% make the call and come back in for the 2-hour reading assessment.

> We look at a reading level based on a standardized test called the Wide Range Achievement Test, and it just gives me that first basic idea: are they a first grade reader, a second grade reader, third grade reader. I also test for 4 Phonemic Awareness Skills that you need to have to be a reader if you're following the Orton Gillingham philosophy: teaching phonics in a systemized reading system. A lot of my adults, who are not 1st Grade readers, do not have those 4 skills and that's where we start. Those are pre-reading skills, skills about the awareness of sounds in our language: individual sounds. We work to help them get better at discriminating between sounds.

Prospective learners who test below the 6th grade reading level can enroll; those who qualify will be offered a service right away if possible, based on the results of their assessment. There are a number of options for students coming in: those with the lowest level skills benefit most from meeting one-to-one with the same tutor every time, but currently, because there are not enough volunteers to meet the need, "there are about 120 people waiting for a one-on-one tutor" (22).

> If someone entered the program and they were already reading at 4th or 5th grade and they had a good job and they just wanted some help, maybe I would never put them in the queue to get a one-on-one tutor; maybe I

> would offer them Start Now and Computer Lab - they need to gain some skills, but we're going to do that very quickly because they already have a lot of skills. (23)

The Start Now program allows students to make a one hour appointment once a week to meet with whatever tutor is available to get started immediately. The Computer Lab is set up with the Reading Horizons Software and multisensory based instruction modules that students at higher levels can work through on their own. Computer Classes are offered for groups of students and facilitated by having a teacher in the room with them. To help with demand, NALC has also started to offer small group tutoring sessions.

Students are re-assessed regularly every 6 months. When a student's reading skills improve to the 6^{th} grade level, there is not a hard break with the program. Depending on circumstances, students are allowed to finish what they are working on, including the time it might take to work through all 68 lessons in the Reading Horizons Software, or they may be segued into more advanced work in a GED program or the Adult High School program.

If a student misses two scheduled appointments with a tutor, they will be dropped from the program for 6 months before being allowed to return, per the agreement they signed at enrollment. When they come back, they start the process all over beginning with an orientation; but, a lot of people come back. "It's not uncommon at all for somebody to call and say, 'Hey, I'm getting it back together and I want to come back.'

We'll say 'We'll be glad to have you; come on in.' So, that's not at all uncommon. I'm sure every month somebody comes back that we knew in the past" (21)

There is a place and another chance for everyone reading below the 6th grade level based on their commitment. The plan is to help everyone succeed who will take the work seriously.

> Our philosophy is: 'Here's some information that I can offer you, and a spelling rule and a sound; now, here is your material; let's put it in there and then you're going to have to work it; that's your job; it's for you to do the homework and get the information into your head; I'm going to help you and guide you, but you're in charge of your own education.' And sometimes it's hard to get people to buy into that philosophy, because it's not been their experience to do that, and they are, honestly, not good students. They know they're not good students because they have been told by 12 teachers that they are crummy students. So, we work to change that and to help them see that they're in charge, and that they have to do this and this and this if they want to see improvement. (19)

Goals met: success stories

Directly excerpted from the interview, Appendix 3 - pages 5, 6, and 9:

In terms of successes: maybe we have somebody that comes in; he wants a commercial driver's license; he reads at 3rd or 4th grade level, maybe has a high school diploma from 25 years ago; but, if he gets a commercial driver's license, he can get a different kind of a job at his work and that's what he's after. We will help him with his

reading skills; his homework will be out of the commercial driver's license book and 5 months from now, when he passes the test, he might say, "Thank you and goodbye." And we're totally happy. He got what he needed; he got some reading skills and he met his goal. We're completely happy with that.

People meet lots of goals here all the time. Maybe they're not going on to college; that's perfectly fine; college is not for everybody. But, if they've gotten the thing they need, and it is just enough writing skills and courage to volunteer at their kid's school, that's a success.

One of my students just called to say she finally had the nerve to go into her daughter's kindergarten classroom and say, "I would like to volunteer;" and they are thrilled to have her. So, it's just that simple, but she was afraid. She knows that she's not a good reader and she thought, "Well the teacher will not want me." So, now she's gained a few skills and she knows what's happening in the classroom because now she's been exposed to 42 sounds in English, and she's been exposed to the names and the sounds of the letters and she said, "I think I could help!" And so, she goes.

Other students: we had a guy that got his commercial driver's license, I think he has three daughters; he got a job with a construction company in town; he drives a cement truck; he and his tutor studied how to mix cement, like quarts of water and sand and something, I don't remember, but they were telling me about it one day. They studied all this while they were with us and that guy now does his components and mixes his own truck-loads of cement and has this job; he now has full benefits, health

insurance, a company picnic to take his family to and he's very happy. But he needed reading skills to get that commercial driver's license. So, now he's on his way.

That particular student graduated from high school, went all 12 years in Nashville; spent most of those years in Special Ed., went to high school every day and he told me one day in a class. "I went to school every day; why didn't anybody teach me any of this when I was in high school?" and I said, because typically nobody in high school knows how to teach reading skills; it's not what they do. And that's a problem we have in a system that's trying to change. And people have tried to make some changes in Nashville; Pedro Garcia tried to make some changes; but, we've got to get to students who are reading below grade level and get them reading at grade level.

We had 2 or 3 students graduate from the Adult High School last year. And at least 2 or 3 other students who passed whatever Gateway test they didn't have yet and had their high school diplomas changed from simple attendance diplomas to regular MNPS High School Diplomas because they passed the Gateway. They were reading below the 6th grade or we wouldn't have accepted them to begin with, but we helped them get their reading skills up so they could pass, typically, the English Gateway. Those are just some of the kinds of goals that our students have.

And it's not uncommon for someone to say, "I got offered a promotion at my job and I turned it down this time, but I want you to help me read better because the next time my boss offers me that promotion, I'm taking it." And I say, "Come on in; this is exactly where you need to be."

I worked with a gal - she worked at St. Thomas as a custodian - she had a form to fill out at the end of every shift; and at the end of every shift she would call her mother on the phone and they would go through this form and her mother would tell her how to spell everything and she'd fill out the form; then she'd get off the phone and turn it in. She's a hardworking, intelligent young woman who doesn't read well; she came out of one of our high schools, she's holding down a job; I've got a million more stories.

Intentionally Blank

Kim Murdoch-Smith: Cohn Adult High School

Mission: The mission of Cohn Adult High School is to provide a unique opportunity for adult students to complete their high school education and receive a diploma in a judgment-free, respectful, mature environment, and enable them to move forward in their lives.

Vision: Limited only by our imagination, Cohn Adult High School will continue to provide superior education to students who at one time retreated from actively pursuing their high school diploma.

We will use our available human and physical resources to facilitate student success at all levels, proving that it is never too late for one to reach one's goals. Cohn Adult High School will be the premier adult high school in Middle Tennessee, a model for other schools of its kind to follow. - Cohn Adult High School Web Page

Ms. Kim Murdoch-Smith is a Metro Nashville Public School (MNPS) Teacher. Now in her 30th year with MNPS, she taught most recently for 7 years at the Alternative School, 2 years at Meigs Middle Magnet School, and for the last 5 years at Cohn Adult High School where she runs one of the school's two A+ Computer Learning Labs; her background is in English and Social Studies.

Ms. Murdoch-Smith and I met in her Lab to talk about her work with adult students on October 10, 2011. She explained the program, walked me through the enrollment process and booted up one of the computers to demonstrate A+ Software as she described how students use it to follow the self-directed learning strategy that's key to the Cohn Adult High School Program. The dedicated, conscientious way she approaches her work, her understanding of the human condition, and her commitment to help students improve were evident as we spoke.

An edited transcription of our conversation is included as Appendix 4 and serves as both background and source for Ms. Murdoch-Smith's insights, views, and quoted remarks laid out in the paragraphs that follow.

The program

The Adult High School program offers graduates a MNPS High School Diploma, the same diploma offered by the other MNPS high schools in the Davidson County School District. Teachers are certified, degreed professionals: full-time MNPS employees, evaluated by district-wide high school standards.

Before students are allowed to enroll, they must come in for an interview with the school counselor, provide a valid birth certificate showing they are 18 years of age or older, and a transcript of former schooling; there is no upper age limit for students who can commit to the time and will try to do the work. The student's prior coursework is evaluated and a course of study is laid out. Students get an informational enrollment packet, and choose, among 4 options, a time when they will be at school and in the Learning Lab: for a two-hour block daily, Monday through Thursday, starting at either 8 or 10 a.m., or 12:30 p.m.; or, if this is not doable for the student, he may elect to come in for the day on Friday. Students are also expected to put in additional time weekly, working at home.

Once enrolled, the school counselor emails a coursework plan to the Learning Lab teacher, who then sets up the needed modules, orients the student to the software and work begins. Students, who are able to manage the computer and adhere to the scheduled Lab time, progress at their own pace until they have the credits needed for graduation.

> The MNPS pacing guide says that if you're not an English Language Learner (ELL) and you're not Special Ed., you should work through at

> least 3 completed folders every 9 weeks and that's reasonable; it's very reasonable. (17)

Students are required to keep a study folder for each modular lesson; in it students take hand notes from the chapter study guides, building a personal notebook to which they can refer during their review test; students get practice reading on-screen, writing on paper, and then reading from their paper notes.

> All the tests students take on A+ Software are open note tests: all tests, including the final exam; they can take or re-take any test as often as needed to get a passing score. It's not about memorizing facts; it's about manipulating information, being able to look back and research; that's what the A+ Software makes possible. If somebody has to drop out for a while, their lessons are waiting for them when they come back. (13-14)

In addition to Ms. Murdoch-Smith's Lab, there is another A+ Learning Lab across the hall, run by Mr. Harris. Although the program is not set up as a tutoring program, these two teachers with complimentary backgrounds covering English, Social Studies, Math and Science, collaborate to assist any student in either Lab who may need extra help to succeed.

Although the requirement is being phased out and will be replaced with End-of-Course Tests, at this time, students who started their high-school career prior to 2009 are required by the state to pass Gateway Tests in English, Algebra, and Biology, to demonstrate competency; "that's a daunting task for people who have been out of school 40 years; they may have already had that coursework, but it was all those years

ago" (19). "And [they] are so out of their element; it is expected that we will give them a good deal of support" (3).

The Adult High School accepts a wide range of students, all ages, with widely divergent skills and abilities; there are adults who, having been expelled from a local high school, need only one or two credits to graduate; some students "come here with zero credits to their name; sometimes they come here to learn English" (6).

> Those [foreign born] students can start with our English Language Learner (ELL) classes; once they finish ELL Level 1, they can come in here for coursework. It's a real challenge for them, but if they've got a year of ELL and have been successful with it - that would put them at maybe 3rd grade level - we start them with a Geography or Wellness module. And for some it may take a long time. (6)

There are adults here in their 30s who have settled and come back now, eager to take school seriously and get their diploma; "there are some 40-year olds here who need help reading and taking notes" (3); there are older adults bent on learning skills and gaining confidence that will empower them to contribute in positive ways to their communities or their churches, for instance.

There are students who "start at the very beginning, sometimes even with how to hold a pencil; there are foreign students whose backgrounds have not prepared them to use basic school materials like folders, or three ring binders" (2); some "who can barely scrawl their own name in their own language" (6);some students come "straight out of refugee camps…some from the housing projects….There are also some hoodlums who

can't read their diploma; I'm not going to lie to you. But it took them years to get that way [and] I can't change it in two semesters, two hours a day" (19); "people also come here as a requirement of their probation [and] sometimes that doesn't work out well….same thing when people need to be enrolled in an education program to qualify for certain benefits" (6).

> In this profession, I don't think you'll last very long or feel very satisfied if you look down your nose at people; we're speaking frankly; it exists in the profession. There are some who have a hard time understanding that this is a service industry and have the feeling: I've got mine – my education, my success; now you get yours. I don't look down my nose at students who may be substance abusers, or who feel discouraged, or who wrestle with clinical depression, or have chronic medical issues; all those things that are barriers and roadblocks in life; keeping an open mind helps me keep a proper view of this job. Now, I do take exception to students who abuse their privileges here or who are disrespectful; I hope I do it with a little bit of diplomacy, but sometimes I have to talk plainly to them about themselves and what they are doing. (3)

"Yes, we have people who have overcome unbelievable things" (8), and people who have come in and said "point blank, 'So when do I graduate; when do I get my diploma?' That [was a] person [who] obviously didn't understand what we are about here" (9).

Three years ago the Adult High School Program was transformed. The program at Cohn was downsized and resources were shifted to support the MNPS Academies at Opry Mills and Old Cockrill. To go to the Academies, “students have to be within six half-credits of graduating; they have to be seniors” (6). This shift helped “separate the 18-, 19-, 20-year-olds from the older learners. And the reason I think that’s important is that the cultures and attitudes are so different; the older learners, for the most part, take learning much more seriously. And so, the Academies are a good thing” (10).

There are 26 computers in the Learning Lab and 36 students are enrolled. Slots are filled on a first come first served basis. The drop list is about 2 to 1, but tracking it is not an exact science because “people will enroll, drop out multiple times, and then finally get that diploma” (12).

> I’m going to start out with 36 people in this room for first period class when the new quarter starts, October 24th. By the end of that 9-week period, I’ll have less than half of them. But, the ones that drop might come back. And some will come back quickly and some I won’t hear of for years. It depends on a lot of things: childcare; work; transportation; all that kind of stuff. (12)

Two graduation ceremonies are held every year: one at Cohn and the other, for the entire pool of Metro mid-year graduates finishing in December, is held at McGavock High School. The graduation ceremony at Cohn starts in the afternoon and afterward the teachers serve cake and refreshments; the library is decorated, and the “students

can invite *all* their relatives if they want" (19) to come and join the celebration. "There are a lot of victories here!" (19)

> In a nutshell, our program is fairly simple; we're not set up to be all things to all people; we have limits; students have to be able to read at a certain level to be successful here; students have to be able to manage themselves; some of the lessons are harder than others. But everybody that comes in gets to try. If they try and can't do the work, we look for some kind of support or resource here to offer them; we have some flexibility, like we talked about earlier. The Resource teacher and/or the Math and Science teacher may be able to give one of my students extra help; a change in their schedule or class time may help. We've had people say, "I just can't work with *him* in the room." Within our power, we do all we can to help students be successful here. And if not, we refer them to the Nashville Adult Literacy Council (NALC) for reading help, to the Social Worker sometimes for different kinds of issues: case by case. (20)

Bob Green: An Hour in the Life of a Novice Literacy Tutor

The secret of the success of the [Adult Literacy] Campaign must be found in a very simple fact, one that is very old and foreign to all technical means: human relationships. It must be found in those intellectual, sentimental and psychological chain reactions, which arise when relations are established between one human being and another. (UNESCO Report 73)

On the night of September 29, 2011, I arrived at the Nashville Adult Literacy Council for my weekly appointments. Not having committed, as yet, to a one-to-one tutoring assignment, I was taking part in the Start Now program. Adult learners are matched with volunteer tutors: both have signed up for hour-long study sessions and are matched by the staff according to the need of the one and availability of the others. I checked in at the desk and received a study-session packet with lesson plan and follow up sheet to enter progress, comments, and notes of interest to the staff and future tutors. I chose a vacant desk and took a few minutes to familiarize myself with the materials in the packet.

Shortly thereafter I was introduced to S__, a young girl who appeared to be in her late teens. We sat down together at the desk and began the usual few minutes *chit-chat* prior to each work session. As we were introduced, the NALC staff member let me know that congratulations were in order; S__ had passed the test earlier that day and received her driver's license. She was beaming with pride and we congratulated her together on her accomplishment. She mentioned that she had been given homework at last week's session and took it out for us to go over together.

All my previous tutoring sessions were to do with literacy, so I was surprised to see a very basic five-page stapled set of exercises to do with money; specifically,

identifying black and white line drawings of U.S. coins, demonstrating knowledge of their respective values, and then solving basic addition problems with them. The line-drawn coins were shown head's side up and were unlabeled; neither the denominations nor the monetary values were shown. Problems were set this way: in some cases a few coins were arranged in a line from left to right followed by a blank line upon which to enter a total amount; others had a blank line following the first two coins and then another blank line after each additional coin, in progressively longer sequences, to capture advancing totals on the way to a cumulative one. Coins depicted were Kennedy half-dollars, quarters, dimes, nickels and pennies. The lessons gradually increased in complexity, but were all constructed at a very basic level. In the top margin of the first page was a handwritten list of the names and amounts for each coin that looked like this:

half-dollar	50 cents	50¢	.50
quarter	25 cents	25¢	.25
dime	10 cents	10¢	.10
nickel	5 cents	5¢	.05
penny	1 cent	1¢	.01

As she handed me the packet, she mentioned that her last tutor made the list for her to look at as she worked and helped her with the first couple of pages to get her started. The ink on the answer lines was the same as the ink used to create the list at the top of the page; the previous tutor must have talked through the problems and entered the answers one by one as they worked during the previous session.

With this in mind, I was not keen to start right in asking her to work the remaining problems without first getting an idea of how much of the work she was able to

understand. She told me that she was not too good with money, but that she was very good at drawing, even faces. I said I knew that drawing faces was hard to do and that she must be very talented.

She told me she had been raised by her maw-maw and paw-paw, but that both her mother and father could draw. Her mother, she said, was particularly good at drawing hands; in fact, her mother's favorite subject was *praying* hands. She put her hands together, showing me the various angles from which her mother had drawn in the past, and pointing out how hard it is to make hands look *real* and *right* when seen from different points of view.

She said her father was locked up but that he sent her pictures of his drawings as he drew them and she had some on her phone if I would like to see them. I said, "sure," and she started to scroll through them: there was a picture of Jesus, standing alone; there was a bleeding heart pierced by a crucifix; a full grown hound dog shown from a ¾ angle; the portrait of a Labrador puppy; a complicated, intricately drawn picture of a scaly dragon, and a few more that I can't remember. The drawings were all very well done.

As the session began in earnest, it was apparent right away, as soon as we started to review her homework, that the exercises were above her ability and we stopped right there rather than subject her to continued stress. We talked for a minute while I was thinking about what to do next and she told me she was currently looking for a job and had applied to every place she could think of to apply but had been turned down by them all because she could not make change at the cash register. I told S__ I

had an idea and asked her to excuse me while I went to see if the learning center had any coins. I explained our need and Sarah Coode, the Literacy Specialist, offered me the zippered pouch of loose change she had on hand in the office. My plan was to take some real coins back to the desk to discover if working from line drawings of coins shown on a page was part of the problem. We cleared an area and dumped the coins out on the desk in front of us to see what we had. I suggested we separate them first by gathering all the pennies together, then the nickels, dimes, and quarters; since they are no longer widely circulated, there were no Kennedy half-dollars in the pouch.

This seemingly simple activity shed light on the difficulty she was having with the exercises. She had trouble sorting the coins; she was confused by the different styles of the quarters and asked if they were all the same; she wondered if the one brand new and shiny copper penny was the same as the others, dulled and blackened by use. She was not familiar with basic numeracy concepts: that two nickels are the same as one dime; that two dimes and one nickel make a quarter; that pennies, no matter how many in aggregate it takes to do so, have the same value as all the other coins as well as bills and can be substituted for each; that a dime is not worth less than the penny or the nickel because of its size. I was silently stunned by this discovery.

We continued to work with the coins and to talk about things she might start to do at home to get familiar enough with coins and counting so that she would be able to make change from a cash drawer. She was very interested and attentive to the real coins and the hour long session went by quickly. At the very end, I asked if she would try to make up 30¢ in change, as if she was going to hand it back to a customer at the register who had just paid for a meal. As soon as I noticed that she was not going to be

able to do it alone, we worked on it together. She was following closely as we made the change several different ways for practice and she left in good spirits and on time.

When I took the loose change pouch back to Sarah we talked for a few minutes about S__'s immediate need to find a job and how far away she was from being able to make change; Sarah let me know that she had already matched S__ with a permanent one-to-one tutor and that their first meeting would be in 10 days. I was relieved to know that she would soon be getting regular and consistent help. I wrote the bulk of this account of that study session the next day, but I have yet to come to terms with it.

It is my view that all honest exchanges between people have meaning. The question now is how to make sense of this one. S__ and I worked for an hour sorting and grouping coins as a start to her learning the value of money. Not in the sense of how it can be earned, or invested for profit, or saved and used to plan a future, as I might with my own daughter; but in the most fundamental and pragmatic of ways: to help her learn how to make change at a cash register. This young woman is an American-born citizen – she is nearly 20 years old - a Tennessean - a Nashvillian – she has a driver's license – has a sense of self-possession – a polite and earnest manner – she is well spoken - she's dressed neatly in clean clothes – a daughter and granddaughter to living parents and grandparents – interested in art and music – proud of her flawed but talented father; and finally, she is in need but unable, having tried diligently, to get a minimum wage job at a fast food restaurant because she cannot make change. How is this possible?

The exchange that took place that night flatly and unapologetically denied the quantum of my prior knowledge; it was a quietly dramatic event. If that sounds overstated, let me explain. I wrote above that I was silently stunned, but it was more than that: I was suddenly shocked to awareness by seeing for myself the fabric of our society as it might be seen through an electron microscope; the holes were really real; not to be denied, not to be debated, not as imagined, related second hand, or seen on TV; the holes were as real and apparent *to me* in that moment as were the sturdy strands, whose woven connections advertise themselves, from only a slightly wider view, as solid. The immediate effect was visceral; the impact was profound and not to be forgotten; later came the somewhat unsettling surprise that I had had such a naïve reaction.

The question now is what next. With a little distance, the cloth is solid and the banner yet waves; but, there *are* holes in the fabric; I have seen them for myself. I hope Winston Churchill was right about us, that we can always be counted on to do the right thing. Let’s ask ourselves: Is it really too much to expect that illiteracy be eradicated in our time? At issue are the most basic proficiencies, without which citizens are excluded a priori from full participation in our great Democracy; even so, I wonder how long it will be before we first try everything else.

Final Thoughts

I have been a volunteer tutor at the Nashville Adult Literacy Council for nearly a year as I write. This information-gathering project was intended to serve two purposes: personally, to gain a better understanding and a clearer picture of the reality of adult illiteracy in Nashville by talking to people who know a lot about the subject; and, in the doing, to fulfill the Vanderbilt University MLAS Capstone Class requirements. After 14 weeks of discovery, I go forward, reinforced as a tutor: better prepared to offer assistance to my neighbors as they do important work in their own lives.

The professionals who contributed time and thoughts to this project through the interview process have between them over 100 years of experience in their respective fields; when the accounting rightly includes my class Advisor, the Dean of the Program, and classmates around the conference table, who also gave advice and encouragement, another 100 + years of experience is added. I am well aware of the value of these associations.

Now that the words are all in, there is time to reflect on the people who gave their time to share them, *my* tutors, as committed, enthusiastic human beings who continue to find meaning in service to others. The actions, words and attitudes of friends and colleagues past rise to mind time and again, many times serendipitously. Going forward, I'm grateful to have added this valuable new group to the mix.

Individual contributors have spoken for themselves, clearly and at length. Below are final, important take-away points listed in no particular order of importance.

1) Illiteracy is invisible; people with low literacy skills don't come forward; illiterate adults do all they can to hide the fact that they cannot read and write.
2) That there are adults in the Nashville community that cannot read is not appreciated in a *real* sense by the larger, literate population they live among.
3) Illiteracy is passed down generationally through the family.
4) Many illiterate adults have come up through the Special Education System in the Public Schools.
5) There is thinking in society that these people, illiterates, had their chance in x number of years at school and should have taken advantage of that opportunity then instead of whatever else they might have been doing.
6) People with low literacy skills that *do* come forward to improve, come forward for two main reasons: because they need to get jobs, and because they want to help their children.
7) There will likely never be enough money available to solve the problem of illiteracy in Nashville through funded programs, public or private.
8) There are many enthusiastic, dedicated people in Nashville working hard to make things better.
9) There is always room for others to join in the effort.

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Appendix 1 - Hunter Schimpff

Place: Panera Restaurant, 2829 West End Avenue, Nashville, TN

Date: October 6, 2011

Interviewed: Hunter Schimpff

Recording Device: Olympus WS-300M Digital Voice Recorder

Transcription: Bob Green

Our extemporaneous conversation has been formatted and edited for readability. Time stamps have been added for reference.

BG = Bob Green HS= Hunter Schimpff

Mr. Schimpff is a Vanderbilt graduate and had been, until October 5th, 2011, the Adult Literacy Coordinator in the Mayor's Office of Children and Youth in Nashville TN. This was a unique opportunity to speak to Mr. Schimpff, as he transitioned out of that position.

We had before us the March 2010 Report, *A Community Needs Assessment for Adult Literacy*, funded by the Dollar General Literacy Foundation, and to which Mr. Schimpff initially refers.

(0:01:10.0)

BG: As I was thinking of how you might have segued into the Adult Literacy Coordinator position, I wondered if you were already working in the Mayor's Office in another role.

HS: No, I was not. This report, funded by the Dollar General Foundation came out with

recommendations to identify a central coordinating entity for adult education and literacy services in Nashville. In response, Mayor Dean wanted to create a position within that Office to focus on adult literacy. That's how my position was created; I started in December, 2010, and I'm currently transitioning out; so, I was there for about 9 months. The Mayor's Office of Children and Youth is essentially Mayor Dean's Education Policy Office for Nashville, Davidson County.

BG: That office interfaces with Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS)?

HS: Yes, we interface with MNPS as well as with community organizations; we coordinate the education initiatives that Mayor Dean wants to focus on. We do the groundwork and identify specific areas of focus - which organizations to try to get more in the game or better connected to each other. I spent a lot of my time as a match maker, explaining why Nashville tends to be a place that's filled with silos. Many nonprofit organizations, even Metro agencies work in silos. I would tell people that from my position at 20,000 feet, I could see all these organizations working on the same issue, but often not together, often not coordinated, often not collaborating; and there are some reasons for that. Part of my role was to try to break down barriers. If all of these groups begin working together, I think in the end it will be much more effective for the learners: those that need the assistance. So, I spent a lot of my time match-making; trying to get organizations to send each other referrals or work together - that sort of thing.

BG: Were people open to that? I wonder how much time the organizations have at their disposal to work on this kind of collaboration. It seems like it would take a full time position at each of the various venues to do the interfacing work.

HS: The answer is yes and no. It was both an art and a science. There were some organizations that were welcoming just because I was from the Mayor's Office; you know, "I'm here to help, a coordinator trying to make things better for the city." You might get somebody's ear, but that might not motivate them to action. Not to say that I had all the right answers. Still, it was a long haul, requiring persistence. Having presented it to the organizations that this collaboration would be more beneficial to them and the learners they serve, they would still need to be convinced. When nonprofits are established, they operate within a certain structure, one they become used to. Also their funding streams are tied to what they do; so for somebody to come in and say, "Could you tweak this element, or maybe work with this organization?" The immediate reaction is, "I don't know about that." You get out the data, show them the picture, lay out the reasoning, and give them some time. They'll say "Okay, *maybe* that works." It's not an overnight deal. It's a long, persistent challenge that is still, frankly, going on.

BG: As a city, can we look at this as a turning point? It looks to me like this was a major step forward: for the mayor to create this position of Adult Literacy coordinator.

(0:07:00.0)

HS: Yes, there are many cities that haven't even examined the issue. It's one of those things that live in a dark closet that you don't want to deal with. I think credit should be given to Mayor Dean for realizing that this is a significant issue. City and State officials are primarily concerned with economic development; that's what gets votes; that's basically why they're in office. They are supposed to continue the pace of economic development in a city. You hear all sorts of other things: education's tied to that; environmental issues are tied to that; but, at the end of the day, it comes down to jobs; it comes down to the success of businesses, and adult literacy is a key issue to that.

Because when companies relocate around the country, one of the primary things they look at is, "What is the quality of the labor force in that city?" They look at wages and they say, for example, "I'm in Seattle and if my cost of a frontline employee, who's likely to be educated, has a bachelor's degree, will cost me $55,000; Okay, I could move to Nashville; their labor force is not quite as educated, but decently educated; there it's going to cost me $45,000. The cost of living differential is a big thing; it might induce a company to relocate.

The key is - let's call it the average per capita quality measure. If 15-20% of adults are illiterate, it's difficult to hire quality staff for all of the local businesses, small, medium and large, because there are only *so* many people *in* the city. A low literacy rate is a huge barrier. So to the extent that that can be solved - I don't think it will ever be solved - but to the extent that it can be alleviated, such that maybe we get our illiteracy rate down to 10% of the adult population, or 5%; that becomes much more attractive, not only to companies that want to relocate, but existing companies, because

they're hiring a more qualified person at essentially the same rate and that translates into greater productivity. That's the primary driver and argument for adult literacy.

It also spans many other dimensions. There's obviously the moral argument. You can also argue that it's a national security issue. There is a recent report[1], prepared by a consortia of military leaders as a policy recommendation, that said 75% of American youth aged 17-24 are ineligible for military service. And, two primary reasons for that are health - that's obesity issues - and education - lliteracy is driving that. Stop for a second and consider the ramifications across the 5 armed forces. They might not be able to recruit the soldiers they need because our high schools are throwing out so many dropouts who can't read or write prose. That's pretty serious; how are you going to fix that?

The military is good at training individuals in boot camp. They may not be as well placed to train somebody that doesn't have core literacy skills. I don't think it's beyond them, but that's not their role. Our education system should have fixed that a long time ago. So, it's a national security issue; it's a moral issue; it's an economic development issue; and, it's really a quality of life issue. Look at other cities around the nation that have more educated populations; you could very much argue that their crime rates are lower; their standard of living is higher. And literacy is a core foundation for all that.

(0:12:33.8)

BG: Do you know where Nashville falls along that line of American cities?

HS: We're in the middle somewhere. Nashville's big competitor cities are Boston and Charlotte. They're about the same size; their government budgets are about the same; but, Nashville is behind both in terms of educated populations. Looking at percentage of the city with a Bachelor's and above and percentage of the city with a high-school diploma and above, Nashville is behind both of those cities. We're also behind D.C, New York, and Seattle, but those are on a different scale; they're much larger cities. Within Tennessee, though, Nashville is more competitive; our numbers are better than Memphis.

BG: After having been in your position for most of a year, what do you see as the most effective thing in Nashville pointed at this issue that's currently up and running?

HS: I would say, *now*, that collaboration is one of the most effective things. When I began, schools and community organizations providing GED/full adult literacy programs didn't talk to each other.

BG: At all?

HS: They did: "Hi, I'm Jane." But, as far as programming for their students, there was hardly any coordination of effort, and that's not optimal: not what it needs to be. Steps have been taken to the point where there is not only better coordination, better collaboration between nonprofits now, but also between nonprofits and MNPS. If you

look at all sorts of organizational management research - you mentioned you worked at Vanderbilt - I think from that experience, you would have a good sense of the same issue there - to the extent that departments can interface and share resources or coordination of effort, overall service is improved. I think Vanderbilt is another place that has determined it has lots of silos.

You see the inefficiencies of it. That same parallel exists among nonprofits trying to provide adult literacy in this city. I'm not calling for a merge of all nonprofits, but let's all get around the table and really talk about how we can cooperate - "If we're full, I want to call you and send you a learner so that he can get a seat." In the past it's been - "He's going on my waiting list because when I report numbers to my funder, a full waiting list shows greater need; and I need to get funding." I completely understand that sense of mission and self-preservation, but there's also the need to serve somebody else; the need to do what's right. And, what I've tried to harp is this: if you look at the Davidson County statistics, we're only touching about 4% of the need. So we're not stealing people from other organizations, let's be clear about that; we're not stealing your GED student, so let's not get into a turf battle over this; 96% is still out there and they're coming in the door every day. That was something that I really tried to emphasize. But again, elements of that still exist; they're going to continue to exist; there are reasons for that.

(0:18:28.5)

BG: There are some battles it really doesn't pay to fight. People have to do the best they can within their organizational constraints. Unless you can provide their funding and take on that role, it's hard to ask people to give more than they have to give at the time; just to be open to collaboration is a great first step though. You've said that you've noticed an improvement over the past months; you've been able to make people aware; connect people; get the ball rolling. Maybe during the next funding cycles they will hear you in one ear, and request additional funds, based on the need to improve cooperation with other providers.

HS: People make decisions based on funding; obviously, it's a prime reason. Statewide, the adult education budget is $17,000,000; that works out to $373 per student served; that's GED classes along with ESL classes. To get a sense of comparison, the need, statewide, exceeds 100,000 adults. Looking at the Metro Schools budget alone - they are an 86,000-student school district and their budget is $688,000,000. So that works out to 8 or $9,000 per pupil served. Stepping back from that you ask: "Is K-12 education more important than adult education? Well, in terms of state budget allocation, clearly it is; it's that much skewed.

Some of that disparity is that our local schools are funded with local, federal, *and* state dollars. But frankly, in terms of State priority, it's low. That $17,000,000 from the State is a drop in the bucket. These federal funds come through under the Workforce Investment Act, which requires a minimum 25% state match. Tennessee matches the minimum; other states match more.

BG: If you think about what's actually involved in making headway with that money; by that I mean reaching outcomes for people; following somebody who started out needing adult education, as he went to a program, increased his literacy level to functional and beyond, got a job, began to be successful and continued in that learning mode, maybe even working up the ladder to a community college for an associate's degree and even beyond that. To empower someone from a very low level to that kind of outcome requires resources. Has anybody charted that cost?

HS: Economists have done those kinds of studies. There is resistance in American society, reflected in the State Legislature that goes something like this: "Well, they had their chance, you know; they went to high-school; they went to the Public Schools for 9 years, 10 years, 11 years; they had their chance then and they shouldn't have been messing around." You'll hear that because it's out there; we're having a very frank conversation. And I would say that viewpoint is a bit limited. I think, if you really understood the circumstances of poverty, you might not say something like that. There are state senators who believe that: the sense that you had your chance. But from a state perspective, I see it really as an investment in the quality of your workforce. If not there, then we pay for it somewhere else.

For example, with low literacy rates comes a correspondingly low level in health literacy. I think you may have seen the 2003 Report[2], the national study. For the first time that year they actually did a component on health literacy. Defining health literacy is hard, but basically it's how well you can navigate the health system and deal with

your own health issues. That's everything from being able to read a syringe properly and giving yourself a safe dose of insulin if you have diabetes, to understanding an insurance form. But individuals without high-school degrees are very likely to be very low health-literate individuals.

So, where do those costs have the most negative impact? You hear all the time from the state: "TennCare: over budget. Medicare costs: rising." Nationally, that drives huge budget deficits; it's the same for Tennessee. How much of that can be attributed to low health literacy? It's significant. Studies have shown that individuals go to the Emergency Room (ER) because they have a cough. Could they go to a Pharmacy and read a medicine bottle, take something over the counter? No; so they don't. Who pays for all those ER visits? What about the cost when someone is given a drug, but takes the wrong amount because he can't read the bottle: it's back to the ER.

When you add up instances like these across an uneducated population, the cost becomes staggering. Whereas: let's say we invest $500 dollars for adult literacy and we increase the state budget to - heck, let's double it to $34,000,000 to serve that many more. I think we would see a corresponding decrease in the cost attributed to low health literacy. But that argument is not often made; those dots are not often connected. Even so, the research shows that if someone is literate and educated, they're much more likely to have better health outcomes. Because they can read, they can look at the right dosage; they can go online and read WebMD. Right now, a large portion of our population can't do those things, even if they want to, even if they had access to a computer. Since they can't read, they can't access that knowledge or enjoy that kind of

self-empowerment. And that's why reading and literacy is such a fundamental cornerstone to someone's ability to function in society.

(0:28:44.5)

BG: That brings up another point. In terms of health literacy, the learning curve associated with becoming comfortable using a computer may be steeper than the curve to basic literacy. Do you think that stands as a second barrier to participation?

HS: I think fundamentally it's being able to read. For example, people leave doctors' offices with handouts and brochures. Doctors even explain things while you're there; "Take 200cc of this." But when you get home and try to read that syringe and you're low-health-literate, you have no idea what 200cc means. It's two different worlds; medical jargon is like a foreign language. There's a movement starting; there are some health literacy researchers currently working at Vanderbilt.

If you think about who the caregivers are, who the providers are; they're medically trained doctors and nurse practitioners; they're very well educated; they take for granted that the language they use will be understood in the culture in which they use it. But, take into account all the foreign immigrants, refugees, and Nashville natives who never learned their numbers; they have no idea what a doctor's saying to them.

It's very difficult to understand instructions from a highly educated medical doctor if he's talking about your glucose levels. It would be much more effective if he just said "You have a sugar problem." Low-health-literate individuals can understand plain

language, “I have a sugar problem; I need to do something about my sugar problem.” They don’t understand medical jargon, but that’s medical training, medical culture, and the way instructions are communicated in that context; and, that’s often how the forms are written. In the hands of a low-health-literate individual, it’s like us trying to read French.

BG: Indecipherable -

HS: Indecipherable: They’ll catch a few things; they’ll get a family member. That’s another thing - asking a family member. As an adult, there’s always shame if you ask your child, “Will you read this for me?” And that’s one of the big barriers to adult literacy: pride. Many individuals just don’t want to admit that they can’t read, can’t write, can’t read numbers. It’s really embarrassing, so, “I’m not even going to say anything.” I think that’s another element of these statistics; there’s a big population of illiterate individuals out there, hidden because they just won’t admit it; they won’t seek out help.

BG: So would you say these reported numbers are conservative ones at best because of under reporting? I can empathize with people because of my personal experience; even though it has been at a much lower level, I have felt the difference keenly over the years in many situations where I was unable to fill in a checkbox on a form to show that I had a college education and in other situations as well; I surely never felt like announcing it to a group. I graduated from high school in 1970, and went to MTSU for a

couple of years, but did not get a diploma until I graduated from Trevecca in 2007; that's a 37 year span without that credential. I don't say I know how it feels to be an adult who can't read, but I can say I have a glimpse of what it must feel like.

(0:35:25.6)

Life happens to a lot of individuals and to the extent that--you know, two years of college, one year of college, OK, from a policymaker's standpoint what it comes down to, to me, is "Are you seeking improvement?" If you don't have a high-school diploma, are you striving to the next step?" I think that's what we should be focused on in our culture. There's an expectation out there that you should have a college degree, and in some work circles, you *should* have a college degree; it's a given. It doesn't' matter that you have a high-school degree and you're the most qualified worker, you're the most competent - you *should have* a college degree. There are plenty of college degrees that you can get that don't mean anything; it's just a piece of paper.

BG: I guess in some sense, it's like wealth: not much of an issue as long as you have it. And from that standpoint, maybe we could agree that applying the business model to Education for legitimate purposes has come with unanticipated results. I'm thinking of an NPR story I heard yesterday about the rapid growth of distance education and distance education fraud. Students can apply for and receive financial aid online without providing transcripts or appearing in person; the online school takes its fee and the student takes the rest, in many cases dropping out of school and splitting the money

with whoever tipped him to the process. This adds to the “you’ve had your chance” cynical view you spoke of earlier on the part of legislators and others and is maybe doubly egregious in that it scams the government and wastes the money, and also enhances the negative side of the effort to educate adults. So it’s an uphill battle, but I’m taking heart in this conversation by the fact that this issue is being focused on and the ball is rolling -

HS: Slowly.

BG: Even if it’s slow, when it picks up speed and becomes a more concrete reality, it won’t matter how long it took; it’s that it got started and will eventually improve; more people will pick a spot and jump in and do something. So, as a takeaway, I’m thinking that what’s been done so far is a part of an upside that’s now in place. I’m wondering this: As you segue out, is there someone else waiting to segue in; what is the plan to keep the progress going?

(0:39:56.0)

HS: I believe somebody will be hired to fill my position. And so, our focus was on adult literacy, both those without high-school diplomas, and those without an AA or a BA because, again, a lot of Nashvillians have a year of college, two years, but never quite finished. And again, back to the beginning of the conversation, it’s about economic competitiveness. Going forward, I believe the focus will possibly be even more skewed

toward the not-finished population and what to do to encourage greater numbers to go back and get diplomas.

BG: Do you think that will have a negative impact on the progress that's been made to bring up the lowest levels?

HS: Possibly, I don't know; it depends on who they bring in. There's good momentum, now, with the organizations that are in this city; they're doing some good things among themselves, and with schools. But those at the lower levels are the underdogs in the game. Look at the Nashville Adult Literacy Council; I think they operate on a $420,000 yearly budget. If you consider the number of people they serve--they're across the county--that's peanuts.

BG: It is, and they are cited as the city's largest group working to advance the effort to provide basic literacy training to Nashville's adult illiterate population in the March 2010 study.

HS: I think people don't understand this really in depth: the implications of an individual not being able to read. If you talk to Judge Betty Green, who is a Juvenile Court Judge, she'll tell you she doesn't know individuals coming through her court, she knows *families*. That's because illiterate parents pass illiteracy down to their children and *their* children; it's generational.

So if you're talking about breaking the cycle of poverty and breaking the cycle of illiteracy, it's got to start somewhere, either Early Childhood programs, a parent; or, there are some Family Literacy Programs that have very successful models nationally; but the point is, from a funder's perspective, Family Literacy is an amazing approach in that you're getting two for one. You're paying one time to help educate the parent and the child. There are not many family literacy approaches because we have fragmented our programs; we take the adults over here to do GED and the kids somewhere else to do Early Childhood.

What about a program where you have mom and dad in a GED classroom for an hour and half and in the classroom next door their kids are playing and learning about numbers and letters? You bring them back for thirty minutes and have them share with each other what they have learned; you've empowered them to continue that education in the home. The parent is no longer intimidated by the child; they may have started out not knowing letters and numbers but they've learned them together in class.

BG: Is there something like that going on in Nashville?

(0:45:19.0)

HS: There are a few organizations that have components like those: Martha O'Bryan Center offers a GED class along with Early Childhood where you get some crossover between parents and children. There is also St. Luke's, which is right over here in in the 37209 zip code; they do some of that.

Again, if you would like some research nationally, you should look at the Barbara Bush Foundation. On her website, if you scroll through, they have a research section. I'll give you another one; I may not get the names exactly right; maybe it's NCFL, the National Center for Family Literacy at Penn State. They do more academic research on family literacy models.

(0:46:40.0)

BG: Penn State does a lot of community work around their campus. I was exposed to some of what they do to increase health awareness and provide screenings through my previous job. It makes sense that they would be doing this kind of thing as well.

As a former member of one of the Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) at Vanderbilt University Medical Center (VUMC), a lay community member, I offered comments on the language in the Consent Forms as a non-scientist to help improve their readability and reduce field jargon. We were using the target reading level of 6-8th grade as a goal; it's not achievable in many instances but it is something to strive for. I noticed over two years on the board and then during the following eight years on staff a gradual but marked increase in sensitivity to the issue; much of the language used routinely by people in this setting is above that of the general population. Functioning at such high levels over time, I think people lose track of how things are for other people in some ways. I don't think people really believe that other people can't read.

HS: I would agree. I think there is a general public perception problem, in that you get

individuals who live in Sylvan Park, Belle Meade, and Green Hills – people who went to school with peers who could read. They didn't go to school in North Nashville, where friends live in the projects next door. They're not from that environment. And so, in the environment and surroundings they're from, everyone can read, everyone can write. But, you look at the numbers; more people live in the housing projects than live in Belle Meade. So if we're looking at -

BG: I didn't realize that.

HS: Well, I just said *for example*; meaning, that there are more in the lower SES (socioeconomic status) classes and the lower-middle than there are in the higher; that more corresponds to the literacy rates; so, yes, there are *lots* of people in Nashville who cannot read; especially when you factor in Nashville's ethnic population. Nashville's, I think, the 5th largest resettlement city in America. It changes every year, but the Kurdish have come, the Somali's have come - and I've seen a statistic that 10% of Davidson Co. is now Latino. These immigrants are residents; they're our fellow neighbors and citizens.

Yes, there are different worlds existing in the same county to the point where, if your social network and your community is Vanderbilt and the people you work with at Vanderbilt, you are among people who have a high level of education as a group. There's a big gap between that group and the group who live in the housing projects, for example. I think that's partly why there's not more funding; because the community

doesn't understand that it's a real problem. So, I think your point is well taken. A lot of people just don't know.

BG: I've read some things in terms of the history of this issue; it's pointed out that you can go back to Plato for a take on the ethics of it. You can't divorce this issue from its political and ethical frame; it will always have that. But in terms of how to overcome the problem - I'm thinking about the Cuban campaign and how the Cuban people of all ages, even young students, were mobilized in 1961 to eradicate illiteracy from the island within the year. It was tied to the revolution and it was tied to the farmers in the hills and rural areas but to me what was as important, and maybe even more important in the grand scheme, was that the effort put the classes in close touch with each other. What the students who went into the hills and lived with the farmers and their families, who worked alongside them during the day and taught them by lantern light in the evenings, could not escape was the daily reality of poverty and illiteracy. If we let alone Socialism and the other -isms, among the usable information contained in this effort, is the fact that one human being, connecting with another in a direct way, in a relationship, can bring about change. Given our political situation, our form of government, and not to promote Socialism, although taking from it some applicable lessons to the point of our discussion, do you think this issue of eradicating illiteracy is too big an issue and touches too many sensitive issues for us as Americans to get to?

(0:57:23.8)

HS: No; I would say America is a very unique place and it's ingenious in the way that it - this brings to mind a Winston Churchill quote - "You can always count on Americans to do the right thing--after they've tried everything else." If you look at what's going on now, Winston Churchill was right.

So I see Socialism as a political system. I agree with what you're saying in terms of the classes - I think our Public School system does that in a sense - in many other countries, the wealthy classes are very separated by which schools their children go to. In America, because we have such a large public system, there is greater balance. It's still not even - you know, if you go to Eakin Elementary over here, your kids are going to be going to school with people who live in Green Hills, middle, upper middle, maybe even higher up--and that's going to be a big difference from Napier Elementary, which is in the Napier Housing Projects. So there is still economic segregation along those lines.

But, to your point: no, I don't think it's beyond America; where Teach for America focuses on mobilizing recent college graduates to go into K-12 Public Systems, why not have a corresponding model, you know, through AmeriCorps, that really mobilizes literacy volunteers? And not just go in and teach literacy to adults and families, but also to train.

I think part of the issue is - it gets into cost - if we're going to try to fund all these literacy programs, we're never going to find enough money in the world to do it, but if we can get our communities, on their own, to be literacy teachers and literacy advocates, I think we'll get an exponential multiplying effect. The difference there is, you bring on a

teacher, you'll be able to teach 60 people; you bring on a teacher trainer, who goes and trains, for example, 10 church group leaders, who then go back to their respective churches, where they know the culture, they know the community, they're better suited to take the lead in that setting - that's, again, back to that kind of cultural divide - I think you'll see greater progress, potentially, in that kind of scenario.

So, I think there are ways to mobilize this effort. In my head I was thinking, maybe we should - funders who live in Belle Meade - we could do an exchange project where they go live in a housing project for a week - I don't know if that would ever happen, but, it would be a great experience.

(1:00:36.4)

BG: It would be a very bold and courageous thing for people to do; to break out of the cocoon that each of us walks around in. I see the courage that it takes for people who come in the door over at the NALC center and sit down with somebody they don't know and work on very basic reading and writing skills. That's so outside their comfort zone at first that I wonder how you would ever broach that subject with people who might not be as bold but might benefit from such an exchange.

HS: What you said: courage. You can bring people from different sides of town into a room together over food--person from Belle Meade, person from North Nashville--they both have to eat, so, you do a meal for them and you bring them into a room and they eat and then they can fellowship and talk about issues and needs and, you know, if

you're the moderator, you could just make sure that it doesn't come down to, "We need more funding for *our* program." But we'd talk about how we actually have a collaborative relationship, it's really two ways, so that, you know, we're providing things that *you* need and you're providing things that *we* need. I mean, I think it *can* be done.

BG: Are you feeling positive going forward about the progress that's been made?

HS: Positive in what sense?

BG: In the sense of having the ball rolling on this issue. It's in the mayor's office; he's made a commitment; it has his continued support. In the sense that this effort won't stall, that it will continue.

HS: Well, in my personal world view, my political view, I don't put a lot of faith in politics and the politicians to solve our community and social problems. I think the American people are much better at dealing with solutions to those. I think for-profit businesses and non-profit businesses are more effective catalysts.

Though few and far between, we do get political leaders gifted with a skill set. But I see successful politicians as people balancing the social contract, and to the extent that they can do that, harmoniously, through their 4 years, 6 years; that's success. I think you're asking a lot of a political leader to go beyond the balance to keep the peace, because, having been in Mayor Dean's office, he has his hands full balancing

the social contract. So, to your point; to get movement, to actually see change, to see it start to affect families and parents, I think the greater catalyst will come from somewhere in the community.

BG: Or from Dollar General for instance: Do you know if Dollar General is working with a group of corporations to do the workforce training? There is a section in the March 2010 Report about programs at work to help people continue their education.

HS: That hasn't really happened. Dollar General only has so much leverage with other corporations and frankly the Mayor's Office doesn't *really*. So, Dollar General can fund programs and they focus on adult literacy--that's kind of one of the primary things they do. The thing with other corporations is - Nashville's unique in that they have some unique and generous leaders in these corporations, but part of the issue is just a cost issue. If you go to a corporate CEO or HR manager and say, to Vanderbilt, for example - they have lots of frontline maintenance workers who would probably benefit from a literacy program - even at Vanderbilt, the first thing you're going to hear is, "How much is it going to cost me?" You know, "How much is it going to interrupt my workflow?" Because that's what they're trained to focus on, they're not trained to focus on literacy training for maintenance workers as an end in itself, and rightly so. And I think another *big* piece to that is with the unemployment rate at 10%, they have the convenience of saying "If you're not literate and you can't cut it; See ya; we have a huge pool to go and pick from."

It's one of those ironic things; I believe it's, "What comes first, the chicken or the egg?" I actually think if you started providing adult literacy programs more *en masse*, the quality of the workforce would improve to the point where it would drive productivity and businesses and then create its own momentum. In Nashville we have a huge population of unskilled workers and then, on the employer side, we have a large number of jobs requiring skills that cannot be filled. And if you actually look at some of the Chamber's statistics, they're predicting a workforce shortage in 9 years for that very reason.

There's a mismatch between the needs of industry, the needs of business, and what that business can go out and get in the workforce. And so you say, "What is that connecting point, what can we do to bring up enough of those unemployed, unskilled individuals to get in there and do those jobs." And there are *some* things, you know, Tennessee's doing a lot with the Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR) System, the 27 Tennessee Technology Centers have a Workforce Development mission; they're doing things – but it's not enough.

BG: you've given me quite a bit of time. I really want to thank you for taking the time to talk. I have a better picture of the issues and groups of people working on this problem of illiteracy here in Nashville. The list you gave me of local providers shows quite a few organizations and, as you said, it doesn't include the unknown number of additional neighborhood-based programs also working on the problem.

HS: It's very humbling to think of a country like Cuba; economically, politically, they're in a much lower place, *per se*, than America, but then, if you were to flip that around and go to a different way of how you evaluate countries on world scales, say you just evaluated them by literacy rates, they would be pretty far ahead of the United States. That would be humbling and embarrassing to the country.

BG: I have also found references to the struggles to overcome illiteracy that took place in China and Argentina, but have not had the time to investigate them just yet. I'm interested in illiteracy as a human issue and as a philosophical issue. It is so complicated and pervasive that almost everybody is affected by it; maybe nobody is unaffected by it.

HS: I would argue not, because even if you live within the confines of Belle Meade or Green Hills, you are going to interact on the road, on the street, at the mall, with somebody from North Nashville and if they're driven into a life of crime because of what's happened to them educationally, and with their literacy rate, then you are affected. The insurance rates you pay in a city, you don't see that other pool of people, but your rate is $100 higher a month, because 80,000 people in Nashville don't have minimal health literacy standards. So, yes, you are affected.

(1:14:39.0)

With my thanks we left it there.

1. Mission: Readiness - Military Leaders for Kids. Ready, Willing, and Unable to Serve. 2009. 20 Oct. 2011, <http://usgovinfo.about.com/library/PDF/unable_to_serve.pdf >.

2. Greenberg, E. and Jin, Y. (2007). 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy:Public-Use Data File User's Guide (NCES 2007-464). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. 2003. 21 Oct. 2011 < http://nces.ed.gov/NAAL/pdf/2007464.pdf >

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Place: Nashville Adult Literacy Council (NALC)

4805 Park Avenue, Room 305, Nashville, TN

Date: 24 Oct. 2011.

Interviewed: Ms. Meg Nugent, NALC Executive Director

Recording Device: Olympus WS-300M Digital Voice Recorder

Transcription: Bob Green

Our extemporaneous conversation has been formatted and edited for readability. Time stamps have been added for reference.

BG = Bob Green MN = Meg Nugent

The March 2010, Community Needs Assessment for Adult Literacy, lists the Nashville Adult Literacy Council as “the largest provider of adult basic education” currently operating in Nashville. We had the report before us and Ms. Nugent is referring to it as our conversation begins.

(0:07:26.0)

MN: Our description has changed since that report was released. The main thing is that as of last December we are no longer affiliated with MNPS Community Education. That’s a big recent change. We’ve always been a stand-alone 501(c)(3), but I was always paid through the Community Ed. Department. Last December, the Community Ed. Department was restructured and the staff of 7 was laid off.

Most of what Community Ed. did was to provide low-cost, non-credit classes; they offered a range of programs at several different high schools. There was one here

at Cohn, but it wasn't NALC; the classes were things like Spanish, How to Use Excel, etc.

BG: My wife and I took one of those Community Ed. classes at Hillsboro High School, the Spanish course, some years ago.

MN: Me too, I took a Spanish Course there years ago too. Anyway, that was a whole program that existed for many years and for whatever reason, our program, but only my salary, was under it. We have always had a non-profit arm, so everything else came through the non-profit: every pencil, every book, every other staff member, and now, because the Community Ed. Department was restructured, we are on our own; our non-profit picked up my salary. That's the biggest change, but our mission is still the same.

BG: You have a nice new website for people to visit. I looked at it before coming over.

MN: Thank you; you can thank Jill and Jordan for that. We're pleased with it because our old website had become outdated; we could change the small things but we had no ability to make big changes to it. That was a problem for us. We can make big changes to this one, now, anytime we want.

BG: I wonder how many people who come here cite the web as the way they found out about you.

MN: We do track it. I don't have the numbers in my head, but we ask both learners and tutors how they hear about us. I think it's definitely more word-of-mouth for the learners, but I think most of our tutors see or hear our advertisements. We run almost constant ads in several places. One is National Public Radio (NPR); we're also fortunate enough

to have free advertisement from Graffiti, the people who do the bathroom ads. And believe it or not, those get a lot of volunteer tutors; I shouldn't say this, but *everybody's* got to pee.

Those, I think are the biggest ways that people find us. But I'm sure a percentage gets to us on the website too. We're also found on other volunteer organizations' lists; we're on the Hands On Nashville List, and people looking for general volunteer opportunities can find us that way. We're on the United Way 2-1-1 helpline; and of course, we're on Giving Matters. We try to keep our name out there because it's critically important for us to have more volunteer tutors.

BG: That's where the rubber meets the road in terms of people. Are you getting enough tutors?

MN: No, but in some ways that's the nature of the beast for a program like ours: a volunteer literacy program. Every program in the country is having the same issue right now, or almost all. These last few years, the demand has been so much greater than usual; you never have enough tutors, but especially now. We spend all our time trying to recruit tutors and train them and match them to learners, but it's just never enough.

Another struggle we're having right now is in trying to meet the needs of the immigrant population in Nashville. We're trying to find ways to cope with it, but we have such huge immigrant needs. We opened a site in Antioch since the 2010 report was published, based on the increase in size and need of the immigrant population in that area. We have such huge needs there and nowhere near enough tutors.

And this past year, the number of volunteer tutors actually decreased from the year before, unfortunately, and despite our best efforts; I will guarantee it's not because we're laying down on the job. This kind of volunteer work doesn't appeal to just anyone. A lot of people like to volunteer for what we call "one time only" jobs, where you go in and do something, and then it's done. And of course you know from being a tutor, this is a pretty regular commitment. And even though we show them how to do it, most of our volunteers aren't certified teachers by background, including us. Even though we know it's doable by a non-teacher, I don't think everyone is comfortable doing this kind of volunteer work, as far as the whole community and what a lot of people gravitate toward. So, those are my theories as to why, but maybe the main thing is the regular commitment over time. I don't know, maybe you had this experience too, but a lot of times people don't know until they get into it how much they're going to get out of it. We have volunteers all the time that say they think they learn more than their learners.

BG: I feel that way myself. There's also that feeling of being useful in a real way.

MN: The important thing about one-on-one tutoring is developing the relationship; that's half the battle. We're not putting on a so-called academic program here, and by that I mean there is no grade that people compete for. We mean for it to go at the pace of the learner and not be intimidating and half of the battle is creating that comfort level so the person can relax enough to make some mistakes; that's part of the learning process.

BG: It also doesn't take long to recognize the courage it takes to walk in this door and display the fact that you need help and then sit with somebody and accept that help. So,

I have great respect for the courage and effort it takes to make it up these stairs and in this door.

MN: We should all have respect for that; I could tell you horror stories people have shared with me about how terrified they are when they first come here. I can't imagine having that much courage. The adults that grew up in our country and never learned to read have spent all of their lives hiding it. You know how it is once you're an adult, longstanding habits don't break easily; we're hard headed.

BG: Americans: we're naturally ornery.

MN: We're naturally ornery as a culture already. It's hard: I always tell people, people our age, you know, we're not as comfortable as the kids are on the computers. It's hard to learn; I mean it's hard to learn anything new when you're an adult. It's not impossible of course, but most of us have had careers and lives without a computer. It didn't mean that we didn't get a job, but when you're talking about reading, it's just so fundamental, and without it you're just so limited; and to actually come forward is huge.

BG: One thing that I've noticed is this: I don't think that very many people believe that people can't read - in America.

MN: It's invisible; they can't see it.

BG: When I have talked about this to other people, no matter how I'm saying it, you can just see that it's not registering. I don't think people believe it's the problem that it really is; I just don't think they believe it - widely.

MN: Well, no, they don't. And one big reason is because it's an invisible problem. You're never going to have people raising their hands saying, "I don't know how to read." So, you know that our statistic here in Nashville is: 1 in 8 adults function at the lowest level of proficiency; it's virtually all around us and we just don't know it because not only are people not going to admit it, they're going to extraordinary lengths to hide it so that you'll never know it.

Illiteracy is not like other social issues; you can see that someone's on drugs or committing crimes or whatever; in cases of domestic abuse you can see bruises, maybe not always, but it's more visible. Think about it; you know people don't like to admit they have a drug problem and they don't admit they're being abused, and if someone doesn't know how to read, the shame is probably greater than the other two. They're ashamed, they're extremely ashamed, and that again is why we think the one-on-one works really well, because developing that relationship gives the learner enough comfort to show their vulnerability. And it's easier too because our tutors are usually not grumpy and tired of teaching 30 people in a class all day.

BG: There is nobody making them come in here.

MN: Nobody is being forced to be here at NALC for any reason. Well, I'll have to make this one exception; we also run classes at the board of probation and parole offices, but very rarely do we have a situation where they're mandated by the judge, which I always fondly refer to as getting the "nudge from the judge."

BG: That's a nudge that matters.

MN: A lot of them have been convicted and they're in that class most likely because their probation officer told them about it and they want to be there. So most times our learners are here because they want to be and that's a very important dynamic; I think it's the difference between voluntary learning and what high school teachers have to deal with when kids just don't want to be in class. Teenagers don't take it seriously at that age and many times don't really see the value of it, among other things.

BG: That whole high school time of life - kids are working on independence issues - and many, many other things.

MN: And who was the smartest at that age, no matter who we are? And the other thing is: what you value at 17-18 is sometimes really different than what you value when you're in your thirties. When you're a little older, I think you can focus better on the things you think are important.

BG: So the program started in 1982?

MN: Actually the program started a little before 1982, that was the year we got our 501(c)(3), and so actually it's been here at Cohn since that time. I personally got here in 1990, but I started out as a volunteer tutor when I first moved to Nashville, which was for me after college, an adult college degree, like you. Well, all college students are adults but an older adult degree. So, I started out as a volunteer tutor here and then a few months later I saw an ad in the paper about a job opening here in the building at a program called Tennessee Literacy Coalition. They were looking for a director and I applied and got the job. I stayed on as a volunteer here though, and then in 2000, the

NALC director, a woman who had been here almost from the beginning, 18 years, left for health reasons, and I applied for her job and have been here ever since.

(0:25:28.0)

BG: Since 1990?

MN: It started with the volunteer work in 1990, but as far as getting paid to work here, 2000. Before then, I was still in adult literacy, but our job at the Tennessee Literacy Coalition was to support programs in the state like this one. We did a lot of back then; we put on lots of conferences, did workshops in local programs; we did all kinds of things.

BG: Tennessee Literacy Coalition: Are they still in operation?

MN: They are; they're not in this building any more, but they are; they're over in south Nashville.

BG: And they still do the same things: overview, organize -

MN: For the state: But they've not had a very high budget in the last few years. Back in the days when I worked there, we had grant money from the state and we were able to do a lot more things. They still do get-togethers with programs, usually on a regional level, which is so helpful with programs like ours because there's really not another program like ours in Nashville; so I don't have anyone locally to talk to about things. When you can get together with other people that do what you do it's really helpful. Plus, we've been trying to cut as many costs as we can. It's been 4 years since we've

been to the national training and we're not going to be able to go again this year, but it's because we need to focus our money on the learners and the tutors.

BG: When you look at the financial pie charts, you can see that the big number of dollars goes for the programs. Everything else is something very small. They reflect just what you said; the money goes to the program.

MN: We're proud of that. It's not official until we put our 990 in, and our audit, but I think we are at 3.6% cost in management/administration vs. program.

BG: That's pretty low.

MN: That's still pretty low. I'm always proud of that. We also do a lot with a little.

BG: What would you say is the biggest change over the years you've been here?

MN: The huge increase in the number of learners and the whole business about the changes in contracting GED providers.

BG: Metro contracts?

MN: The contract is funded by the federal government; the money passes through the state and is put out to local programs. The GED contract has changed hands three times in three years here in Nashville. That's a problem because of the huge learning curve associated with it for anyone who's picking up that contract. The net result has been a decrease in programs and where that's affected us the most has been with immigrant learners. Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) had that contract for twenty-some years and they were running like a well-oiled machine; they had as many

as 30 English classes around town and what we did as a complementary strategy was put our classes where there were gaps in coverage; it was never enough, but it worked out really well. The only classes available under the state program are a few at Belmont United Methodist Church; I think there are only 4 classes there right now. That's led to people coming out in large numbers to be served by us and I think that's the main reason we're so packed up in Antioch, because it's an area with such a large immigrant population. Because we don't usually do GED except at the parole board, that hasn't directly hammered our program. But obviously we need to have GED classes available for our learners to move to as soon as they finish here; fewer GED classes mean less opportunity for our learners who need them.

BG: When you say move: that means you register students here who aren't ready for a GED program and work with them to raise their reading skills to a level where they can be successful in a GED setting.

MN: Or an Adult High School program, which by the way is still in this building. Yes, many of our adults are here because they want a GED eventually, so that's the obvious transition for them. That's very difficult right now, but I'm sure that after Tennessee Tech gets up and running things will improve. There's such a steep learning curve.

BG: In other words to learn the guidelines, the system -

MN: Yes: and to know the expectations and how to report data and what kind of data to collect. They have all new people, so everybody will be learning and the field of adult education is not so cut and dried, it doesn't fit neatly into a box, it's loaded with, how

would you say this? It's just a complicated issue. So there's a lot to learn for anyone new in adult education of any kind.

BG: Maybe that's one of the reasons that basic adult literacy has sort of an underdog status. It's difficult to set up a quick set of check boxes and measurements of progress don't follow easily predictable timelines: things that affect the whole funding process.

MN: Well, it can be done, because we do it, and if we weren't able to do it in some way, we would never have any funding; we all have to keep track of things and report, but the issue is, and I'm sure other non-profits have the same issue, when we're talking about adult learners, nobody follows the straight line you think they're going to follow, and especially because they're adults, there are things going on in their lives that have to be dealt with; sometimes they want to start, but barriers appear; many times our learners are on the fringe financially, and one little thing will create a snowball effect to stop them. Maybe someone like us could solve the same problem with a credit card that we could stretch out a bit: the car blows up; can't go to work; can't pay for daycare, you know, things happen. But even though people aren't always able to follow a prescribed timeline, we have successes and we show successes all the time or else we wouldn't be here right now.

BG: For the period of months that I've been coming here, I've seen a group of engaged individuals continuing to show up and continuing to work and have seen that people are improving.

(0:35:17.0)

MN: I would agree with you because we see that all the time. The other issue we have that's a bit more difficult is that when you're successful in a GED program, you get a credential; you have your GED. For us, because we're mostly dealing with the really lower levels, progress is much slower than in a GED program. Not to say there aren't barriers and issues there too, but in our program we know progress is going to be slow at first because of how low learners sometimes are when they come to us.

To help with that, we try very much to find out things about their lives, the kinds of things that are meaningful to them; of course, we're definitely in the business to increase their reading level, but helping them learn to read by reading things that are very important to *them* gives them something they're interested in and useful right from the start. They're not going to be reading Tolstoy's War and Peace or anything like that, but the things they do want to read, things we take for granted, are better for them to work on than just what you find in a reading book.

I remember one guy that wrote in our book about how great it was that because of what he had learned, now, when he went shopping for bread, he could tell the difference between white and wheat. He pointed out that nowadays the covers are brown, so you can't really see inside them; he had been taking a total guess every time he bought bread; that seems like something so small to us, but it was extremely important to him.

BG: As readers, we really take reading for granted.

MN: I don't know why that is. I'm just thinking out loud here, but I wonder if it's because we really don't remember learning how to read. I don't remember; do you? Surely we

did learn, but maybe because we can't remember it or we never had an issue with it, we just sort of take it for granted.

BG: I don't remember having one of those pivotal moments where I suddenly realized, I can read! or anything like that. You're right; I can't remember.

MN: I don't recall any of it. The best I can recall is some of the books I read, about Tip the dog or something like that, but my mom says I was reading before kindergarten. So it's very hard to understand what basic learners are going through. We've had some tutors who actually did struggle as kids but they got over it, probably early on, but people who struggled with it would be more likely to remember that process. I think most of us just pick it up and it's no big deal and therefore we just assume everyone else did.

I remember this from high school: I jumped a year in high school from 10th to 12th grade by taking an English class in summer school. If I hadn't done that and graduated in the year I was supposed to, I would have had to take the national proficiency test; it was mandatory the next year. The year I graduated, because it was the very first year the test was given, I didn't have to take it to get my diploma, but I remember thinking then, "Of course we know how to read and write, we're in 12th grade!" But obviously, we didn't all know how to read and write. I just remember that feeling of, "What do you mean; this is silly that we have to take this test." Since it wasn't mandatory, and at that time I wasn't doing anything that wasn't mandatory, I never took it. But it's been a requirement ever since.

BG: I have been trying to figure out how it is, other than dropping out, that people do manage to get through high school and still be unable to read.

MN: Well it doesn't happen as much now as it used to because of those proficiency tests but there are loads of reasons. There's the stereotypical sports situation; athletes have been passed through to play sports, we've even seen people passing through college that way. My first learner, as a volunteer tutor to this program, was a gal who read on a 3rd grade level and she had a two year Associates Degree of some kind; that blew my mind.

And another thing: years ago when we were more of an agricultural society, you could still make money and have low education; a lot of people actually left high school to go to work on the farm, especially if they grew up poor. I guess there are lots of reasons why kids get passed through. I'm probably not the one to answer that because I'm not a K-12 teacher, but nowadays if you can't pass that proficiency test here in Tennessee you get what's called an Attendance Diploma, that's if you got all your credits, I guess, but it doesn't mean you can go and sign up for college.

BG: Would you then need to get a GED to override that Attendance Diploma?

MN: In that case, if all you were lacking was just the proficiency test, you would go to the Adult High School here in this building because they have a plan in place just to prepare students for the proficiency test. That's what I would do if I was in that situation because the GED is a whole other test. For it, you have to start over studying all the 5 subjects. But this doesn't happen as much anymore that people get out of high school without being able to read. That's a good thing!

BG: That's quite a history from 1990 - the evolution of a program; the evolution of Nashville; the evolution of a population differential and the economic evolution; since 1990 we've been through a couple of up and down business cycles.

MN: We survived the 9/11 glitch, and in the last ten years we've had steady growth; we made it through that, but this year I'm thinking if we can just stay the same, that's going to be a good year for us. I don't ever want to go backwards - and we're not the only non-profit that's in this situation - but with the economy this bad, all kinds of social needs are increasing.

Of course we had the flood here in Nashville, and obviously people having a house to live in is higher on the ladder than learning to read at that particular moment; everyone can relate to that. We've also had the stock market trouble and many times corporate funding ability is tied to the stock market. Right now we're just trying to hold our own.

But also right now we have a mayor who recognizes not only the importance of adult literacy, but of education in general, and that's a good thing, because we already know that the main reasons people come to us are job related; the top two are job related: to get a job or to get a promotion, get a better job; and the third is so they can learn how to help their children with school and homework or whatever else they need.

BG: Those are key areas of living.

MN: Because the key benefit that comes with enabling parents to teach their children or help their children learn to read is making sure that it doesn't happen all over again;

illiteracy tends to be passed down generationally. Besides that, I think we are a fundamental cause that's tied in to people's ability to be successful getting jobs. So, I feel good that at least there's an awareness of that here in Nashville, for sure thanks to the mayor, but also the Chamber and all the people who are putting their attention to it.

BG: It really helps to have somebody in the flagship position have it on his list.

MN: I'm sure you won't find anyone alive who says, "Oh no, reading's a bad thing." So it's not like anyone ever disagreed with it, ever, but -

BG: but to highlight it in a positive way and put some energy into it and some money behind it -

MN: Yes.

(0:45:51.0)

BG: This 2010 report recommended that they get a coordinator, someone to go around and make connections with all of the literacy providers in Nashville and help them work together to meet common goals. Hunter Schimpff was the Literacy Coordinator for 9 months or so, having just recently left the position. He told me that the ball was rolling now, but that much more needed to be done; we are right at the beginning of this new effort. I wonder if you were able to feel any impact from those efforts. What was your experience of the past year?

MN: Well, we pretty much have worked and still work with a lot of the other providers in Nashville. But, as far as this effort, the mayor created the task force to look at the

literacy problem and Dollar General chaired it up; they brought a lot of us together to discuss things back then and I haven't heard that it's disbanded, but we haven't met for a while now. We all know each other for the most part, but you know how it is; you get so busy in your separate little worlds. I think the getting together was very helpful in that way.

First of all, our program was studied for the report, so we were an integral part of the picture. And after it was done, Dollar General and the Mayor's Office created the position, the coordinator position, based on the recommendations in the report. So I think that's the main result; it just doesn't ever hurt to have an excuse to chat with people, because it can lead to different things; and it's a little small world here in Nashville, this adult-education-work world, so we do tend to already work together where we can, but you know, we get sucked into our own little worlds, and people don't get out as much sometimes; so, having someone act as a coordinator is good.

BG: Hunter thought that someone would be hired to take his position and that they would continue with the coordination effort going forward.

MN: I hope so; I haven't heard anything yet.

BG: Let's say it's given that it takes a while for anything new to become a reality in a wider social sense, even if a committed group of people have been working on it for some period of time. And that over the next maybe 5 years, if it continues and becomes established as a reality in the minds and lives of the community-at-large, a more coordinated effort would be realized: gaps in coverage, like you mentioned earlier, could be more easily identified and addressed and maybe other things as well. As an

established reality, it would have its own momentum and draw support and involvement from among a larger group of Nashvillians. Mr. Schimpff was positive in his assessment of the effort so far and hopeful for the future; and I'm hearing you say that you see it as very positive thing as well.

MN: Oh yeah, it's put attention on the whole literacy cause and that's important to us for loads of different reasons. Probably another reason why people might not even know to volunteer for us is because people are unaware of the issue and unaware of us, as a program. This helps keep public attention on the issue which is a win-win for all of us that work in this industry, I guess you'd call it.

BG; I think NPR was where I heard about the program and I think it was that statistic about how many people in Nashville can't read, I believe it was 1 in 5 at the time, that hit me hardest; it was like someone punched me in the nose. It's a staggering number when you're looking around.

MN: Well let me tell you some good news. The study where that number came from happens every ten years and the last 10 years it was 1 in 5; now it's 1 in 8, so we are improving.

BG: After I heard that first statistic, I was thinking, well, that's 20% of the people I see when I look around, maybe; not in every situation, but whenever we find ourselves in a cross-section group of the Nashville population, shopping at the Mall or -

MN: It's amazing: I always tell people we're driving down the road next to them.

BG: Triumphs?

MN: I think what the learners get out of it is what it's all about here, and their accomplishments, which are many, many, many. That, to me, is the most important thing we do; and defined by them in their own words, of course, in our yearly book series, as you know. And I have to say that it's all very motivational for me personally, and probably for many people who work here because we also get to see volunteer tutors, who come out and spend their time and stay so committed and make all this happen. So, it's a win-win.

I always, for example, feel sorry for police, because they're always seeing everyone at their worst, even if it's you or me; they're seeing everyone on their worst day. We, on the other hand, see everyone doing their best. We see people coming in here trying and trying to keep on learning; we see tutors who really want to be here, hanging in there, coming all day on a Saturday to be trained. It just gives a kind of a vibe and an energy that maybe other places don't have, because it's all people at their best. So I particularly enjoy that part of it; it keeps us all going.

(0:55:18.0)

BG: That's really great: to be able to say a thing like that, isn't it?

MN: It's very rare; it makes all the underpaid stuff worth it. I know there are lots of people out there who don't really like their job and I can't even begin to relate to that because of what we get to see every single day. That's not to say that every day's bright and sunny, but whenever it's not bright and sunny, you can quickly get out of it. And there's no reason for anyone that works here to feel sorry for themselves, because we can all read.

BG: Challenges?

MN: Funding challenges, volunteer tutor challenges: those are our two biggest. And again those things are the nature of the beast for a program like ours. And any non-profit's challenge is having enough funding to meet the need because, it's just one of those things; there's never enough.

So we just keep trying to build, and particularly in this last couple of years, trying to stay the course, because we believe that what we do is definitely necessary and critically important. Even if you think just about the money, it costs a whole lot more that what we're asking for to pay to address the other outcomes; I don't think it's an option.

I don't want to put all of society's ills on people that can't read, because that's not the case, but you know there is a pretty large group of prisoners that have low reading skills. Illiteracy creates poverty and keeps people in poverty and that's a big trap: very difficult to get out of it. So, I think society will spend money on other things if they don't help us with this issue.

BG: In terms of needs and wants. Are there things that you need right now that you're unable to get?

MN: One thing we always need is technology, and by that I don't mean people's trash technology. We did just get a donation from an IT guy that works for other companies; he got us replacements for the computers we had in the Computer Lab; they're not brand new, but let's call them gently used. Keeping up with the technology is often difficult for us; we make do with a lot of things.

The money we spend on books is huge, we spend about $40,000 a year on books, for example; books are always a need. And of course people's salaries; that's my particular job; we don't want to go backwards there. For another example, we have a new project: we were one of two programs in the country selected to be on a grant with a national program for citizenship, so we've created 9 citizenship classes in Nashville. It was a planning and capacity-building grant and we want to keep moving forward with that; we spent all this time getting things up and running, so we want to keep those 9 classes; you'd hate to say it was all for nothing.

And the other big challenge, because of our sheer number of learners, especially immigrants right now, is to figure out ways to serve more people with the same amount of resources. So one thing we've done is we've put together some small groups in addition to one-on-one tutoring; one tutor to 2 or 3 learners so we can stretch out our resources. I'd say right now that those are our biggest challenges.

BG: On the wish list side?

MN: One hundred thousand more dollars!

BG: Just an infusion of more funds?

MN: Yes, I think 1 or $200,000 - our projected budget this year is a little more ambitious than it's been in past years; of course, we don't know where we're going to be until we get to the end, but I hope we can get to that ambitious budget; if we do, it will just be meeting our needs; it won't be jumping ahead.

BG: It's not quite $100,000 more that it has been, but it's up there close.

MN: But one thing I will say: I'm super proud of everyone that works here; something we're really good at as an organization is stretching our money and making do with a little. So, even if we don't get to our projected budget, then we also won't be that high in expenses. We'll see what happens, but yes of course anyone's going to tell you that: money, money, money!.

BG: It takes money.

MN: And more volunteers; you know we're dealing with 6-700 volunteer tutors with this little money; it takes people and money to keep that large a group going. Because you can't just say, "OK, here you are, tutors, now go and do it; call us when you're done." It takes people to coordinate and facilitate. So, we spend money to support the 700 volunteers, but the volunteers help us make our little bit of money go a long way; it's a good deal, I think.

BG: That's a lot of people.

MN: That's a lot of people to keep up with. I don't know how much interaction you've had with any of our staff.

BG: I've had very good luck. Anytime I've had questions, I was answered; any time I've asked for something, it has been given.

MN: And imagine doing that for 600 people.

BG: I hadn't realized there were quite that many tutors, but anytime I've asked to be involved in a particular training session, Sarah signed me right up and added me to the

class. From my perspective, everyone has been very responsive and supportive and welcoming.

MN: Well it's important to do that because you can't just throw someone in to it. That's a mistake that people who try to develop little groups like this don't realize. And it's not that it just makes it a good value for the money, because support doesn't come for free; that's for sure. But people don't realize that; they just think because it's all volunteers that they'll just go off and do it, but you really do need to support them. There are always questions. When someone's new to volunteering, they'll always have questions, so, we've got to answer them.

BG: There's a learning curve like anything else.

MN: We're certainly not perfect, and we always need to get better, but one thing we're lucky with is having long term funders in town.

(1:04:32.0)

BG: So, Dollar General -

MN: Dollar General is huge, but Dollar General not only puts their dollars to the cause, in the last few years they've really tried to do things to keep the issue in the public eye; that to me is more of a commitment than just handing out money. Dollar General is a very important funder for us; I can't begin to say enough about them, but there's United Way, Memorial Foundation; we've had these same funders for many years.

BG: So, three funders?

MN: Well, HCA has also been a long term funder, Scarlett Foundation; those are our main ones: but the best thing is just having had them for so long. Nashville's just lucky, I have to tell you, because the director of the Atlanta organization, the one that's on the citizenship program grant with us, has said how impressed she's been with Nashville's funding infrastructure. We're a small enough town that all of us in the literacy effort can work together with our funders on fundamental issues; I think we're just lucky. We also have the Center for Non-Profit Management; not every city has a Center for Non-Profit Management.

BG: A shared resource?

MN: It's a low cost resource to help us do our jobs. I think that for whatever reason our funding community is more active than some others even beyond the dollars; maybe it's because we're such a small town; if you stick around long enough, you're going to know everybody.

BG: It's considerably bigger that when I was growing up here. But in many ways it still has a small town feel to it.

MN: I grew up in a suburb of D.C., Greenbelt Maryland it was called, built by Eleanor Roosevelt back in the 40s; it's one of three greenbelt-type towns in the country. It was laid out so that even though it was a contained community, it was not isolated; it was easy and safe for people to walk around and yet it was right outside a city. Well, anyway it was a small town, but not boring because you could always go to D.C. or wherever and the people there all knew each other and of course I was there many years. One of the really nice things I liked about Nashville when I moved here - which, by the way, I

moved from Oxford Ohio, which was too small - was that same sort of feeling. It's big enough for stuff to do but not too big, like New York. That's one of the appeals that Nashville had for me; but that's nothing to do with your topic.

BG: Well, I think we're pretty close to an hour now, and I want to thank you for taking the time to talk. You've given me a lot of good useful information.

(1:09:0.0)

With my thanks, we left it there.

Place: Nashville Adult Literacy Council (NALC)

4805 Park Avenue, Room 305, Nashville, TN

Date: 26 Oct. 2011.

Interviewed: Ms. Sarah Coode, NALC Literacy Specialist

Recording Device: Olympus WS-300M Digital Voice Recorder

Transcription: Bob Green

Our extemporaneous conversation has been formatted and edited for readability.

Time stamps have been added for reference.

BG = Bob Green SC= Sarah Coode

As the Literacy Specialist here at the Nashville Adult Literacy Council (NALC), you are directly connected to the learner interface, and are in a great position to provide a view of the process.

(0:6:00.0)

SC: I'll give a little bit of background about myself; I was a volunteer tutor with Nashville Adult Literacy Council for 8 years before I took a position and started working here. I've been here now for 10 or 12 years. Basically, what we provide is literacy services to adults, 18 and older, in Nashville, who read below the 6th grade level. If they are already reading at a 6th or 7th grade level, they can go on to a GED class and be successful. But, as a general rule, if they read below 6th grade we'll serve them. Most of our learners who were born in the United States are from Special Ed. backgrounds.

Sometimes they know their specific diagnosis: dyslexia or something; sometimes they don't know why they didn't learn to read as a child.

When I started working for this program, our main focus was to get each learner a volunteer tutor who would meet with them a couple of times a week, one-on-one. But, we have so many students waiting now that we've developed other avenues and ways to teach: small groups; a Start Now Program, where we give someone services right away while we're looking to find them a tutor; we have a list of websites that we recommend where students can go get free reading help via the internet; we also have a computer lab where people can come in whenever they want to work, once they are registered with our program, and get reading skills on the computer. We're trying to make it possible for adults who want reading skills to get them regardless of whether or not we're able to match them with a one-on-one tutor.

Of course there's the whole puzzle of, "Why are there so many people out there?" And there are multiple reasons why so many people need help. From that 2000 Census, you can see that Tennessee actually has 53% of its population in the bottom 2 categories; we were number 49 in the nation. Over half of the adults in Tennessee are in the bottom 2. We're rural, though we're becoming less and less rural, and nowadays everybody's got to be able to read. Twenty years ago, you could be a car mechanic and not read; you could work on the farm and not read; it's not like that anymore.

Ten years ago, we had a huge influx of car mechanics because of the change in technology; you plug in your car, a read-out comes up on a computer screen and if you

can't read that material, you can't keep your job at the repair shop. And so, we had a lot of students coming in back then.

So that's kind of where we are and what we do. I probably ought to talk a little bit about how we assess our adults.

BG: That would be great.

(0:09.34.0)

SC: We require that our adults come in to an orientation just to hear about the program. The orientation is about an hour- hour and a half. I talk to them about reading skills, about the 42 sounds in English; I show them the materials we use; I explain our process and that they actually have to sign a letter of commitment saying that they understand there will be homework and classroom work - a multi-level thing - and that they've got to put across a lot of effort too to do this.

We are not connected currently with any of these programs where if you come to school you can get your food stamps or anything like that. We're just a little non-profit. We're just a little bitty group of people, mostly volunteers, who are trying to provide something that's needed to this community. And we like to keep our philosophy simple like that because otherwise it just becomes overwhelming. So, that's kind of our philosophy. We're just a little bitty non-profit with a whole bunch of volunteers trying to help people in this community with reading skills or with English as a new language.

Our students come to the orientation, hear all about it, and then call back to schedule an assessment. So, if their wife made them come down here to listen to my

orientation, but they don't really want to do it, they can't sign up while she's sitting in the lobby waiting on them. They have to call me back on their own desire to do that. If they do, they can come back for that assessment. But in order to get into the program, they have to be reading below 6th grade, sign a letter of commitment saying that they understand the process, that volunteers will be teaching them, and that they will have to do homework etc.; then they can enroll. After their assessment, if they qualify, we will offer them something; be it our computer lab, one of our small groups, our Start-Now program, or matching them with a one-on-one tutor. If they qualify, we'll offer them some service, and then see what happens.

(0:11:50.0)

BG: What kind of response do you get? Of the people who come to the orientations, how many call you back, make the appointment, and come on in? I don't know if you track that.

SC: We do track it and we have all the records, and if I'm going to guess, I'd say it's about 80% that will call back, schedule an appointment, and come in for at least the follow-up assessment. Something else I do want to talk about is, "What are the goals of my students, why do my students even come in here; what is it they want from us or want from this community?"

BG: That's great.

SC: So, two of the most common reasons people come to us are 1) they're out of a job again; it's hard to keep a job when you're not a reader, and 2) they have children in

Metro Schools, and they want to help those kids, and they don't know what to do. They know they're missing something so critical to their own child's education if they, the parent, cannot read. Those are two very common themes that motivate my adult students.

So that might be why they come in here, but in terms of successes: maybe we have somebody that comes in; he wants a commercial driver's license; he reads at 3rd or 4th grade level, maybe has a high school diploma from 25 years ago; but, if he gets a commercial driver's license, he can get a different kind of a job at his work and that's what he's after. We will help him with his reading skills; his homework will be out of the commercial driver's license book and 5 months from now, when he passes the test, he might say, "Thank you and goodbye." And we're totally happy. He got what he needed; he got some reading skills and he met his goal. We're completely happy with that.

People meet lots of goals here all the time. Maybe they're not going on to college; that's perfectly fine; college is not for everybody. But, if they've gotten the thing they need, and it is just enough writing skills and courage to volunteer at their kid's school, that's a success.

One of my students just called to say she finally had the nerve to go into her daughter's kindergarten classroom and say, "I would like to volunteer;" and they are thrilled to have her. So, it's just that simple, but she was afraid. She knows that she's not a good reader and she thought, "Well the teacher will not want me." So, now she's gained a few skills and she knows what's happening in the classroom because now

she's been exposed to 42 sounds in English, and she's been exposed to the names and the sounds of the letters and she said, "I think I could help!" And so, she goes.

Other students: we had a guy that got his commercial driver's license, I think he has three daughters; he got a job with a construction company in town; he drives a cement truck; he and his tutor studied how to mix cement, like quarts of water and sand and something, I don't remember, but they were telling me about it one day. They studied all this while they were with us and that guy now does his components and mixes his own truck-loads of cement and has this job; he now has full benefits, health insurance, a company picnic to take his family to and he's very happy. But he needed reading skills to get that commercial driver's license. So, now he's on his way.

That particular student graduated from high school, went all 12 years in Nashville; spent most of those years in Special Ed.; went to high school every day and he told me one day in a class, "I went to school every day; why didn't anybody teach me any of this when I was in high school?" and I said, "Because typically nobody in high school knows how to teach reading skills; it's not what they do." And that's a problem we have in a system that's trying to change. And people have tried to make some changes in Nashville; Pedro Garcia tried to make some changes; but, we've got to get to students who are reading below grade level and get them reading at grade level.

We had 2 or 3 students graduate from the Adult High School last year. And at least 2 or 3 other students who passed whatever Gateway test they didn't have yet and had their high school diplomas changed from simple attendance diplomas to regular MNPS High School Diplomas because they passed the Gateway. They were reading

below the 6th grade or we wouldn't have accepted them to begin with, but we helped them get their reading skills up so they could pass, typically, the English Gateway. Those are just some of the kinds of goals that our students have.

(0:17:00.0)

BG: Those are great stories. The reason I asked you to fill out the personal side is because I don't think people understand what it means when you say that other people can't read; that people all over Nashville, and not just a few, cannot read and write. And, as a matter of fact, those same people would benefit if they could sit down with somebody and learn how to sound out their letters, learn how to put letters together to make words and how to put words together to make full sentences. I get blank looks, as if they might be thinking, "Come on now; there's no way you can function and not be able to read. When you say 'can't read,' you really mean they can't read well." I don't think people really believe this.

SC: I think you're right.

BG: I think that might be one of the major barriers to a wider interest in finding a solution to the problem. There's a disconnect there that I've noticed personally in talking to people about this issue.

SC: And there's an exact reason why that disconnect is there. Adults that don't read well don't want anyone to know they don't read well. So, your neighbor might not read well, but you don't know it because he's hiding that fact. Most of my adult, American, low-level reader's families are even unaware of what low-level readers they are. It's

possible to hide it well and develop coping skills so that no one has any idea that you're not a reader.

There was a guy in my class whose wife has a college degree and is a computer specialist. They would go to big corporate dinners at restaurants, and he would always order whatever the House Special was because he didn't want anyone to know that he could not read the menu. There would be a lot of discussion around the table and he'd look at the menu like he was reading it, but he would always ask the waitress, if she didn't offer the information, what the special was, and he would always order it.

BG: That's an excellent strategy

SC: Yes, it's a great coping skill. People use coping skills to hide the fact that they're not good readers. And if they take a job at McDonalds and they say to this other guy, "show me how to use this machine one time and I'll be able to do it" and the guy says, "Ok, you just do *this*." Forget about reading directions, if you can show them one time they're going to master it because that's how they learn everything. And you don't know that they're not a reader because they've never said that and they're never going to say that out loud.

You know our students don't want their pictures in the paper; they don't want their bosses to know this. We publish a book of writings; there are lots of initials in there because their bosses don't know the employees are not readers. And it's not uncommon for someone to say, "I got offered a promotion at my job and I turned it down this time, but I want you to help me read better because the next time my boss offers

me that promotion, I'm taking it." And I say, "Come on in; this is exactly where you need to be." So, that's a third reason, really, because that's happened more than once.

I worked with a gal - she worked at St. Thomas as a custodian - she had a form to fill out at the end of every shift; and at the end of every shift she would call her mother on the phone and they would go through this form and her mother would tell her how to spell everything and she'd fill out the form; then she'd get off the phone and turn it in. She's a hardworking, intelligent young woman who doesn't read well; she came out of one of our high schools, she's holding down a job; I've got a million more stories.

BG: These are the stories that put a face on the issue, that help people see it clearly enough to really believe it.

SC: Yes, because if you can explain the coping skills sometimes people will say, "Well, I know what you're talking about. One time, I was looking at all these birthday cards and this woman said, do you think this would be a good birthday card for my husband? Maybe she was trying to say, 'Is this for husbands?' Do you know what I mean? Maybe she just wanted to clarify." People don't know. There are a lot of people out there without well-developed reading skills, and as a community we should be helping them.

BG: I agree. And we have a Mayor now that, even though his focus is not specifically on basic adult literacy, is on record stating that he will take this on, that he will "champion this cause." This kind of attention, focused on the topic, will eventually spread, don't you think?

SC: I think so, yes. I mean we need to help all of our adults that need help with their GED and high school diplomas; we need to do that. But if their level is so low that they need reading help, we ought to be offering them that help too. And, as a community, I think we ought to dedicate ourselves to that. I also think we need to get down into our Metro Schools and make sure that our students are learning how to read in school. I think we're totally capable of doing that, but I think it's not a choice we've made yet, as a city, because it's so multi-leveled and, as a city, it takes a long time to get down to the basics of reading and writing.

BG: It seems to me, in terms of barriers, that politics is one of them. Having been a person who has thought about and been exposed to the problems of illiteracy and who has worked around that system for many years to help some of the people not well-served by it, what are your thoughts about what might be done?

(0:27:45.0)

SC: Well, I wish that children in Kindergarten, 1st and 2nd Grade were taught by teachers who are reading specialists, who focus on teaching reading. Not K-8 teachers, whose focus is widespread across a vast amount of material, but specialists who are focused on teaching reading. So that when a child is in 3rd and 4th grade and on up they are established readers because they've had a reading teacher for those first three years and that was the focus; after that they can learn anything they want to because now they can read. I think we need to make some shifts in how we do things, and that's so difficult for us to do.

I think Nashville has a problem because we have a lot of very successful private schools and when parents can't get the education they want from their public school, they send their child somewhere else. I think there are a lot of parents in Nashville who have lost interest in Public Schools. I want to put the focus back on Public Schools because Public Schools are us, they're our community and we all should have a very vested interest in every single Public School in our community.

BG: I agree. Here's another issue: consistent quality. Not all public schools are of the same caliber; a snapshot taken on a given day in given settings around the city would show the differences.

SC: Exactly: And it's a huge problem, and it has many factors, and it's a very difficult thing to control, but, we need to teach these children to read!

BG: It's hard to argue with that. In the Tennessee Code Annotated the legislators have said, and you mentioned the 3rd grade, that at the end of the 3rd grade students should be "adequately" prepared, is what I think it says. That word allows for a wide range of interpretation. I wonder if that means kids should be demonstrating reading and writing and comprehension; maybe at the least if it was reading and comprehension and continuing to work on writing skills going forward. But to be able to access books and information online seems like a reasonable goal for the end of 3rd grade

SC: I agree; there's a great website about the need for people to be able to read in our society. It's called Children of the Code. It has tons of information on it and it also deals with what happens with our children when they're not readers. In includes one of those

statistics about basing our prison population numbers on percentage of kids not reading at third grade, if you've ever heard that statistic? Have you ever heard that statistic?

BG: Say again?

SC: That the prison system, in trying to figure out how many new prisons to build, makes projections based on the third grade reading level: how many kids can't read at third grade.

BG: That those are going to be our inmates of the future?

SC: I think so, and I think it's on that website.

BG: I'll look for that.

SC: Look for that; it's on there somewhere. But the whole thing about reading is having an educated populace. If we want people to be able to educate themselves and be part of their community, they've got to be able to read. But if we don't, and if we want a very stratified population, and if we want to keep a working class poor, and a wealthy upper class, all we have to do is not teach everybody to read.

BG: You recommended to me the writing of Horace Mann on this subject and I found his essay, *The Need for Education in a Republican Society*, just to your point. It makes a common sense argument to say that it's unjustifiable to think we can have a Republican Society that includes a large number of people who can't participate. That goes directly to the moral argument - what we tacitly if not actively agree to tolerate as a status quo.

SC: That we as a nation find it acceptable for 53% of the adults in Tennessee to be low-level readers: I find that horribly unacceptable.

BG: When the March 2010, *Community Needs Assessment* was released, the Mayor spoke to the assembled group; you can listen to his remarks on the Chamber of Commerce website; they are also on YouTube. He made a personal commitment and drew public attention to the issue that day. What are your thoughts on the gap in public awareness about illiteracy?

SC: I think it's just not talked about; I think the gap's always been there. But, like I said, this is not a group of people who will come forward and say, "Well, I can't read." They don't want anybody to know that; that's one of the reasons why it's so hard to address. We offer them privacy over here; we're not going to put their names in any of our publications without asking them. People don't come forward, but the problem's always been here. We need to offer more services.

BG: There is a city-wide focus now that started with Mayor Dean back in March of 2010 Do you think this is the first time these issues have been supported so actively from the mayor's office?

SC: No, I don't think that. One past mayor had a Literacy Day and mentioned it but the fact is, there's a problem with literacy in Tennessee and it's not talked about very much.

Our current mayor decided to create a task force to really look at the issues, but I don't think the issue has ever been hidden necessarily. Of course, people don't like to

talk about that we're 49th in the nation in education; it's not something that people like to mention that much. So, I don't know.

BG:, Thee message is so clear in terms of the focus and the dollars directed at early intervention that it's easy to understand the heightened attention to this part of the problem.

And then there are people within reach of a GED or who have their high school diploma and went to college for a year or two and for whatever reason didn't finish - improving those numbers contribute in a positive way to the economic prospects of the community; businesses look at this as a workforce issue: how the percentage of our population holding GED certificates, high school diplomas, AA and BA degrees can be increased and put forward to attract and support new and existing businesses.

But that still leaves this basic literacy population as underdogs in the effort. They're not off the table; they're just at the lower end of the scale. I wonder what your thoughts are there.

SC: What you're saying is that Nashville will be attractive to new businesses if those businesses know there are employable people here to work for them: those people having at least a GED. Because, if they see that we don't have an educated population, that we have a lot of people who aren't good readers, and don't have high school diplomas or GEDs, then prospective businesses won't want to choose us because they want people who at least have what we think of as a basic level of education. That's a reason why we would want to work this initiative and get some help out there to folks and get people into GED classes and get them some reading skills. I guess Nashville

may be starting that again, but there have been GED classes around for a long time and we here at NALC have been in business since 1982 helping people learn to read; we just need to keep at it.

The other thing is, if we go back and look at Metro Schools for a minute, that there are a lot of different philosophies about reading. There's a whole language philosophy and there's a phonics - Orton Gillingham - method of reading. And then there is that whole philosophy that, "Well, if 9 out of every 10 kids in my classroom are readers, do I really need to worry about those 2 or 3 kids that aren't really getting it? Aren't I supposed to go on; isn't that my job; does the school system not tell me, 'You've got to go on the next thing, you can't worry about those 2 kids.'" So, there are lots of different things happening in the school system that we just need to look at - and solve.

BG: I'm thinking that Exceptional Ed. is directed at those 2 or 3 in the class that are not getting it. And that there has been an increase in mandated inclusion related to the No Child Left Behind Act that mandates a mechanism to catch more of those kids going forward.

SC: And though it looks like that would be true, I'm not sure that's the case at all; I'm not sure that those non-readers in the class would be labeled Special Ed. or that they would get extra help, or, if they were, that they would get reading help. And if their issue is just reading, I'm not sure that they would get anything extra at all. So, it is just many faceted, what's happening; certainly, many of my students have said, "Yes I was in Special Ed., but they didn't teach me reading in Special Ed." Historically, we've tried lots of different things; there are still good ideas out there, and I think we need to get some of those in

place, and I think we should be teaching reading to that K-3rd Grade set, with reading teachers, and not just teachers with K-8 General Education Certificates.

(0:44:0.0)

BG: If we think just about the population you have here at NALC, knowing they come here with various skills and abilities, do you have a sense of how much time is needed for you to have them exit the program reading at 6th Grade or above?

SC: I could give you a number of scenarios, because it's totally dependent on what we learn when we do the 2-hour assessment. We look at a reading level based on a standardized test called the Wide Range Achievement Test, and it just gives me that first basic idea: are they a first grade reader, a second grade reader, third grade reader. I also test for 4 Phonemic Awareness Skills that you need to have to be a reader if you're following the Orton Gillingham philosophy: teaching phonics in a systemized reading system. A lot of my adults, who are not 1st Grade readers, do not have those 4 skills and that's where we start. Those are pre-reading skills, skills about the awareness of sounds in our language: individual sounds. We work to help them get better at discriminating between sounds.

If I was going to describe it to you, and I compare it this way all the time because my car mechanic's taught me this, I'd say: So, maybe my car mechanics can't read, but when I pull my car into the lot, they can tell me exactly what's wrong with it. They know if I need new spark plugs, or there is something wrong with the exhaust system. They know because they've learned to listen and hear all the different sounds that a car makes; they can tell me exactly what's happening with my car. But they can't talk about

language if they don't have the phonemic awareness skills; they can't talk about *bat* ends in /t/ because they don't know what I'm talking about yet; they're not familiar with individual sounds; I have to teach them that. And in the same way, though it would probably take much longer, they could teach me all the sounds of the car, so that I could be aware; but, I'm not aware. Phonemic awareness is all about the individual sounds in our language and being able to recognize, identify and manipulate those sounds; and I test for that.

If my student comes in with a 2nd or 3rd Grade reading level and has all 4 of those phonemic awareness skills, I've had people go to a 6th or 7th Grade reading level in 6 months if they really put their heart and soul into it; and in a year if they also had a full time job and had a lot of issues. But if they don't have those 4 skills, it's going to be longer; it takes more time. It takes a lot of other practice at the beginning to get those skills. It's just very different for each student, but we can usually devise a plan at the end of their 2-hour assessment based on what I find when I test them. So, sometimes it happens quickly and sometimes it's a much slower process, depending on where they are and how much time they have to put into it.

(0:47:31.0)

BG: That's another factor; there's no substitute for practice.

SC: Exactly: and we encourage students to expect that all of their homework and practice will be on the subject they've chosen. So yes, maybe "au" and "aw" both make the sound /aw/ like in the words *August* and *awful*. But this student's bringing in his commercial driver's license book or his church bulletin or whatever he or she wants to

read and I'm showing them here's that sound and spelling in these words that you want to read: maybe it's a cookbook, maybe it's a newspaper.

We're trying to take these reading skills and put them directly into their lives today, so they'll be reading and writing things they want to be reading and writing about while they're learning specific reading skills. And that's something you don't get when you're a kid, because when you're a kid, you're stuck with whatever the classroom book is. But for our adults it's different; they're choosing the reading and writing materials that are going to be a part of every one of their lessons. And I'm just giving them a workbook teaching a specific sound and spelling that they can then transfer over into their own materials.

BG: Given that you have willing learners here, have you found that without the baseline commitment you require and even the contract that students agree to abide by, that people wouldn't take the program as seriously?

SC: Maybe they wouldn't take it as seriously; that's why we've set our program up like we have. Our philosophy is: "Here's some information that I can offer you, and a spelling rule and a sound; now, here is your material; let's put it in there and then you're going to have to work it; that's your job; it's for you to do the homework and get the information into your head; I'm going to help you and guide you, but you're in charge of your own education." And sometimes it's hard to get people to buy into that philosophy, because it's not been their experience to do that, and they are, honestly, not good students. They know they're not good students because they have been told by 12 teachers that they are crummy students. So, we work to change that and to help them

see that they're in charge, and that they have to do this and this and this if they want to see improvement.

BG: Sort of like the tough love approach: has that stopped anybody that looked like they were serious otherwise?

SC: I think probably so. And when it has, I always think to myself, "Well, they're not ready; they're not hurting badly enough." I can think of a gal that was working at her uncle's store. She thought it was just way too much work to do all this homework for me and work at her uncle's store too - maybe she should just be content. She wasn't willing to put across that much effort. But, maybe if she ends up without a job at her uncle's store, she'll look at it differently. I can't make anybody come here, nor would I want to. I want them all to walk in voluntarily off the street because we have something that they need.

BG: You have a very accommodating, very welcoming, approach here. I believe you would do anything in your power to help the people who come here for help. What if things just don't work out? What happens when you recognize that it's time for you and the learner to part company?

SC: It's happened a few times. Let's say they simply don't show up for two appointments that they've made with one of our tutors. So, they don't show up the first time and we tell them, "We only give you two strikes;" if you're not going to come, you need to call us beforehand to let us know." And then if they get a second strike, we call them on the phone and I always try to start by saying, "In 6 months we would be glad to have you back, but, you got you're second strike and we're going to drop you from our

program, for now, because those are our rules and maybe you need to get it together a little bit, get you schedule worked out or whatever, and in 6 months you can call us and you will be welcomed back, but you're going to have to take a break for 6 months." That's what happens when they get 2 strikes, and they have signed a letter of agreement to that. It doesn't happen very often, but when it does, I don't have any trouble at all saying "We will be glad to see you again in 6 months."

(0:54:04.0)

BG: That's as inclusive a break as you could possibly make: Just not now; looks like it's not working out; 6 months goes by and you're in a different frame of mind, call us and we'll be glad to have you come back. When someone calls back, do you do a new assessment and start the process all over again?

SC: Yes, they start back over with an orientation.

BG: Starting back at square one?

SC: Yes.

BG: So, really, you're never out; this is a place you can come to when you're ready and it is especially helpful to come here when you are ready.

SC: And a lot of people come back to us. It's not uncommon at all for somebody to call and say, "Hey, I'm getting it back together and I want to come back." We'll say "We'll be glad to have you; come on in." So, that's not at all uncommon. I'm sure every month somebody comes back that we knew in the past.

BG: I guess in this kind of business, it goes against almost everything you stand for to say “you’re out.” You can’t be all the way out in a place like this; you’re never going to be all the way out until you can read at 6th Grade. There is a place and a chance for you here at any time until then based on your commitment, and if you are committed, not only is there a chance, but we’re going to do everything we can to help you succeed in your own quest here.

SC: Yes.

BG: That’s an accommodating philosophy.

SC: Well I think we are really accommodating.

BG: I do too, based on my own observation; but, it makes sense to have some limits.

SC: Right. And you know we’ve got a waiting list of people trying to get a tutor and if you’re just in a position where you can’t be a regular student right now and you’ve actually not even been able to call and cancel appointments, then this might not be the time for you.

BG: What kind of waiting list do you have right now; how many people?

SC: Right now, I think there are about 120 people waiting for a one-on-one tutor.

BG: Would those people be coming in to Start Now?

SC: They might be, just depending on their assessment; most of them are offered the opportunity to come in to Start Now. But after the assessments we can offer a lot of different things; we have Small Groups and One-on-One and Computer Lab and Start

Now; their assessment guides us as to what we might offer someone. Not everybody is invited into Start Now; it just depends on where they are and what is happening.

BG: What would leave them on the waiting list?

SC: We just don't have enough tutors. Even if they are coming in to Start Now, if I don't have a tutor, they might be in Start Now until I finally find someone who has said, "Yes, I'll meet you at the Thompson Lane Public Library on Tuesday nights; and then I match those two people and the student leaves Start Now. But I don't have enough tutors. My volunteers are wonderful, but I don't have enough of them; I've got people waiting in line for me to find someone who will volunteer.

BG: So the ultimate goal is to get someone a one-on-one tutor? The other options are helpful to people while they're waiting. Do I have that right?

SC: Not exactly right: It is our main philosophy, but if someone entered the program and they were already reading at 4th or 5th grade and they had a good job and they just wanted some help, maybe I would never put them in the queue to get a one-on-one tutor; maybe I would offer them Start Now and Computer Lab - they need to gain some skills, but we're going to do that very quickly because they already have a lot of skills. Someone like that is not going to be one of the students I put in that queue for a one-on-one tutor and have them wait over an extended period of time. Again, what we offer someone depends on their assessment.

BG: That's the answer to the question in terms of the route in to NALC. There are a number of possibilities coming in, with the main goal of getting a one-on-one tutor if

someone really needs basic help. But for those who already have some basic skills and can work more on their own, there are other options available as soon as they get registered.

SC: The goal for everybody is to be reading above 6th Grade. Depending on where you are when you get here, we might put you in a small group; we might get you in Start Now or offer you Computer Lab or one of our computer classes, which works for some of our higher level students. Those students all work on computers with a teacher in the room with them, trying to review all the rules and move rapidly up to a high school reading level and then go. It just depends.

BG: That brings up another point. Do you have regular ongoing assessments?

SC: We have assessments every 6 months.

BG: So, you come to your assessment to be tested for 6th Grade reading level and above; what's the conversation you might have with learners at that point?

SC: It depends. Let's say that at that 6-month assessment it was determined that you were reading above 6th Grade, and you have a one-on-one tutor and your tutor wants to continue with you; you can keep on going; you two can stay together and continue through whatever book you're in or whatever you're working on.

Let's say that the tutor is finished with their commitment to us and they say, "You know what, I'm going to take a break for a while." You will not get another tutor form us because you are already reading above 6th Grade. But, if the tutor wanted to stay with

you and the two of you wanted to finish a book or something, we don't break people up that want to stay together.

If you're in our Computer Lab and you're now reading above 6th Grade, and want to finish the program, which has 68 lessons, you could finish that. We're not going to throw you out. We're going to let you finish whatever you are already in at the moment and keep on gaining skills. But, after you are reading above 6th Grade, we would not be getting you a new tutor in the future. If your tutor quits and you're only at 3rd Grade reading level, I'll find you another tutor.

BG: When people are ready to leave, do you try to refer them to other programs?

SC: Right: Because if a learner is wanting GED, then we have a list of all the GED Programs in town and we definitely say, "We think you ought to go into GED class" and even let's say that learner was still using our Computer Lab, if he's ready for GED and reading at 6th Grade, he could start learning GED skills now.

Metro has a website available via the Public Library that's teaching GED skills. Students can register and do GED work on the computer; I can give you a copy of that before you go. And there is a list of GED classes in town and we tell students about those all the time. And sometimes that's where we might get a referral. The student will come in and say "Well, the teacher at this GED class said I really need some reading help." And then, if the student is, in fact, reading below 6th Grade, we'll try to help them improve to the point where they can get back into that class.

I have a student wanting to get into Barber College. And he just needs to get more practice with reading and reading skills; he's actually sort of been accepted but he's not a great reader; he's probably about 5th Grade, but he just wants to review some. So, there are just different things. But some learners might go on and continue their education; and when they do, we try to steer them towards wherever they want to go.

BG: That's the top end of this program then, to get people functioning at the 6th Grade reading level and then to take another step?

SC: Right.

With my thanks, we left it there.

Appendix 4 – Kim Murdoch-Smith

Place: Cohn Adult High School, A+ Learning Lab, Room 111

Cohn Adult Learning Center

4805 Park Avenue, Nashville, TN

Date: 10 Oct. 2011.

Interviewed: Ms. Kim Murdoch-Smith

Recording Device: Olympus WS-300M Digital Voice Recorder

Transcription: Bob Green

Our extemporaneous conversation was formatted and edited for readability.

B = Bob Green K= Kim Murdoch-Smith

Ms. Murdoch-Smith and I spoke candidly throughout; specific remarks, germane to the larger, ongoing conversation in the field of Education, but outside the scope of this paper, were not included by mutual agreement.

K: I came to the Cohn Adult Learning Center with the Alternative School Program; I taught for 7 years in the Alternative School. We met at the Boys and Girls Club on Thompson Lane until we moved into this building. I left the Alternative School and went to teach at Meigs Middle Magnet School for two years, and then was offered a position in the Adult Program. So, it's my 30th year in Metro and my 5th in the Adult Program.

The Adult Program went through a big change three years ago; the Academies at Old Cockrill and Opry Mills were created, resources were shifted, and 10 of our 12 teachers were repositioned; I was very grateful when the principal asked me to stay on

here as a teacher in the A+ Learning Lab; A+ is the self-directed software used by our students.

Mr. Harris was added last year in the A+ Learning Lab across the hall; his background is in Math and Science. And we have a resource teacher next door to work with the many among our adult population who have undiagnosed special needs. We also have an ELL teacher, who starts with students at the very beginning, sometimes even with how to hold a pencil. There are foreign students here whose backgrounds have not prepared them to use basic school materials like folders, or three-ring binders. So, we have that: we have students who got kicked out of Hume Fogg and need two classes to graduate; and, we have how-to-hold-a-pencil.

B: That's quite a range in functional ability among your student population. In terms of the school day, I notice some students come in for 2 hours, Monday through Thursday; and then there's a separate group that come in for the day on Fridays. That accounts for work schedules and gives students quite a bit of flexibility.

K: Right; that's exactly right. But they also have to commit to working at home for so many hours a week. I'm able to see that on my computer: how they're working along and progressing; that additional work at home by the students is part of our standards. One nice thing is that we do have leeway to work case by case with people inside our program guidelines. Does that make sense?

B: If you find somebody that needs additional help or needs to have more flexibility, you have the ability to help that person.

K: We do. We do have a resource teacher next door whose primary goal is to work with learners who still have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) created for them while they were in Special Ed., now called Exceptional Ed. We also have many adults over 21 who have aged out of their IEP, or perhaps they were never identified as Special Needs students or Exceptional Learners; we also have some who have been out of school for 30 or 40 years, and are so out of their element; it's expected that we will give them a good deal of support; there are some 40-year-olds here who need help reading and taking notes.

In this profession, I don't think you'll last very long or feel very satisfied if you look down your nose at people; we're speaking frankly; it exists in the profession. There are some who have a hard time understanding that this is a service industry and have the feeling: I've got mine – my education, my success; now you get yours. I don't look down my nose at students who may be substance abusers, or who feel discouraged, or who wrestle with clinical depression, or have chronic medical issues; all those things that are barriers and roadblocks in life; keeping an open mind helps me keep a proper view of this job. Now, I do take exception to students who abuse their privileges here or who are disrespectful; I hope I do it with a little bit of diplomacy, but sometimes I have to talk plainly to them about themselves and what they are doing.

B: In terms of acceptance into the program, I saw on the website that an interview is required.

K: The intake process: if, when, or for whatever reason, an adult finds himself in need of a MNPS High School Diploma, he contacts the school and interviews with our counselor. She will provide handouts with information and ask him to bring his transcript to their meeting. Former Metro students can get their transcript from the School Board, but if he's from somewhere else, the counselor will request it from his former school, usually by email.

At some point, the counselor does a transcript evaluation - Well Bob, all you need is Government and the second semester of Algebra II and you can graduate. Or, it might be that you need many more classes than that. Either way, you get a school handbook laying out student responsibilities and obligations; a supply list, that I've developed, with a little description about what A+ is; and you're asked if you can arrange work, child care, and transportation in order to be here for 2 hours Monday through Thursday . You pick one of three arrival times that suit: 8 or 10 a.m., or 12:30 p.m.; and you're in.

The counselor will send me an email that says Bob Green needs Government and second semester Algebra. I enroll you on A+ and then you come in and start work; learning here is self-directed learning. I do an orientation; I show you how the software works, and when you've completed the courses you have been assigned, you can apply for your diploma. All students need to have their birth certificate, with their name stated

correctly on it and graduating students get a regular diploma from an accredited school. This is not a General Equivalency Diploma (GED); it's a regular Metro Nashville Public High School Diploma. We are evaluated here by the same standards used at Hillwood or any other Metro high school and have the same credentials; we are highly qualified, full-time, MNPS employees.

B: Do you know, in practice, if employers see one of those two diplomas as better than the other when someone is applying for a job?

K: I don't. I have heard our counselor say many times, though, that a GED is much more difficult to obtain now than it has been in the past. It is my understanding that the GED standards have been raised.

(I handed Ms. Murdoch-Smith a copy of the April 2011 issue of the Cohn Warrior Times, in which she is cited as the Teacher of the Month. There is also a feature article on the first page, highlighting the 30-year-old, Star Student of the Month)

B: Congratulations on your Teacher of the Month! I can also see you have a 30 year old Star Student of the Month; what is the age range of the students you work with?

K: Eighteen and up: I've had some that were older than I am. There's no age limit and no required background if a student can come to school and commit to the class time.

We take students who don't qualify to attend the Academies at Opry Mills and Old Cockrill; to go there, students have to be within six half-credits of graduating; they have to be seniors.

Students come here with zero credits to their name; sometimes they come here to learn English. Those students can start with our English Language Learner (ELL) classes; once they finish ELL Level 1, they can come in here for coursework. It's a real challenge for them, but if they've got a year of ELL and have been successful with it - that would put them at maybe 3rd grade level - we start them with a Geography or Wellness module. And for some it may take a long time. We have some foreign students who can barely scrawl their own name in their own language; it's really a stretch for them here.

Many students are illiterate in their native language. And while language immersion is a really good thing, it takes *years*; and, you could be a really effective teacher, but the gains aren't going to show while you have that student.

People also come here as a requirement of their probation; sometimes that doesn't work out well. That person might enroll here, show up a day or two, see we don't play around, and then we never see them again. Until the probation officer checks, it goes unnoticed in the court system. We drop students after they miss 5 days, but they can re-enroll the next quarter and do the same thing over again.

Same thing when people need to be enrolled in an education program to qualify for certain benefits: Section 8 Housing; Food Stamps; subsidized Day Care; once they enroll, they have a registration paper; that allows them to qualify for assistance whether

or not they attend. Our counselor has tried to call some of the agencies in the past; the response was, “Well, our software can’t deal with that. They showed us the paper that said you registered them, so they’re eligible for the next 12 months.” I resent it that some people abuse the system, but there’s not a dang thing I can do. Not just as a taxpayer, but they take a spot someone else could benefit from.

Another ongoing issue is the technology; these computers were donated to the program through the efforts of one of our previous teachers, which I thought was really nice; they’ve been around the block; they’re well used; but they work, and we manage to power all of them with just the two outlets in the room. What happens here is: I’ve got 26 computers; we’ll register 36 students and see who shows up; it’s first come, first served.

B: Like the Airlines, you overbook and over time you’ve figured 10 are not too many?

K: Right - trial and error - Or we can look on the criminal court website and find that someone who has signed up is in lock-up; we have some of that. But that’s not the norm.

B: Here’s a perfect example of one who’s not, right there on the front page. (Pointing to the Star Student highlighted in the Warrior Times, April 2011)

K: C_____ is still with us; she hasn’t graduated yet. Yes, we have people who have

overcome unbelievable things. I've got a foreign student, a diabetic, Mr. B_____. I don't think he's older than I am, but he looks 20 years older. He's severely crippled; the ELL teacher thinks it's from a land mine. And, now he is a lay leader in the _____ Church in South Nashville. He's the treasurer; he's so –

B: Being here has built his confidence?

K: Yes, yes. Absolutely! He didn't come back this quarter, and I called him a couple of weeks ago; he doesn't have a thousand dollars to fix his car, and I think his leg is not in good enough shape to take the bus and then the walk. It's a hefty little walk across the park, but he tried it; somebody donated him an old laptop. He brought it in last week for me to look at it, and rode the bus all the way over here. He forgot how to activate a drop down box when selecting from a menu; he forgot how to do that function. He rode the bus all the way from South Nashville for me to show him how to do that. He'll probably never get a diploma, and it'll count against my evaluation: Who cares?

B: Seeing that man show heart; it's hard not to be lifted up by that. I guess there are more things happening here than can be accounted for by check boxes. I also wonder about this: in terms of the literacy itself; the computer is a whole separate literacy thing aside from being able to read and write: to be -

K: You're right. We work with the computer and A+ Software; that is what we use here;

and so not everybody can do this; and then if the resource teacher can't help them - this program is not for everybody. Let me show you what the software looks like on the computer.

But we don't make apologies for it because we are not set up to be all things to all people; we can present an opportunity; we can give support; but students have to be able to do certain things and put out the effort on their own. I have written in the student guidelines: "You may have to do extra work outside of school."

At the other end of the spectrum from Mr. B_____, I've had someone come in and say point blank, "So when do I graduate; when do I get my diploma?" That person obviously didn't understand what we are about here.

Here's something new; as of just a month ago, my students have been allowed to start logging on and working from home.

B: Do all the students have computers or have access to computers?

K: Some do not. Everybody can go to the Public Library, but within the boundaries of our program, there are just some times when we know, "If there's a will, there's a way." I might say to a student, "I noticed when you enrolled that you have an email address." And they might say, "Oh, well, that's my cousin's." We hand out information on how low-income households can get broadband Internet for $9.99 per month. I still say for those that want to improve, "If there's a will, there's a way." There are some people who don't have the will, and that's Okay.

I give Dr. Register credit for the Academies at Opry Mills and Old Cockrill; it was a rough implementation, but a good idea because it helps to separate the 18-, 19-, 20-year-olds from the older learners. And the reason I think that's important is that the cultures and attitudes are so different; the older learners, for the most part, take learning much more seriously. And so, the Academies are a good thing; under No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the school system is trying to get the younger students graduated within a certain amount of time, even though they're over 18; and it does help separate the populations.

B: It seems like it would be a good thing to have students take the next chronological step in their lives with an accomplishment rather than having left it open.

(We are now sitting at a computer workstation and Ms. Smith has the A+ software program open to show me what it looks like and how it is used)

K: Absolutely! So, in the long run it's been a good thing. Okay: A+ is the magic bullet; Metro has contracted with Systems Integration Incorporated; this is their star. And if I'm not mistaken, the Metro graduation rate, last year, or maybe it was the year before, went up 11%, and A+ gets the credit for that. Because A+ is now used in Summer School, A+ is now used for credit recovery in the afternoons; say somebody flunked Government last year and didn't attend Summer School like they were told they should; now they can get Summer School credits, remediation, in the afternoons; it's credit

recovery.

This is also cheaper; computer labs are set up in these schools instead of hiring a History teacher and a Government teacher and Physics and Chemistry etc. I have 40 different subjects going on in this lab at the same time. Our program is set up for self-directed learning; we're not set up to tutor; although, I do have a Math and Science teacher across the hall now that I can send students to and he sends students to me for English and Social Studies; we are in each other's Labs all the time. I've also recruited volunteers and had the students teach each other because it's a full time job to manage this, much less tutor.

There are the same kind of holes and gaps in A+ as there are in any computer learning strategy, but there is a 5-year contract with Metro Schools in place right now and it's been a good thing.

(As we look at the computer, Ms. Smith navigates through the screens on her side of the program.)

Alright, here is *my* school, *my* class; let me pick out a list of all the lessons; if somebody wants help with the ACT college prep test, I can drop *this* in their menu; *these* are credit recovery classes that my students get; *these* are practice tests that students can take to prepare for their Gateway Test; since this is web-based software, homebound students can take part. *These* are people who finished with me last year. *These* are people who dropped. Looking at *this* list, I can give you an idea of the students who finished; I don't know without counting, that might be 50 names.

B: Do you track this over time to see how many student starters complete the program?

K: Here's how long the drop list was for me. So, I would say 2 to 1. You know, Bob, it is sort of hard to say because people will enroll, drop out multiple times, and then finally get that diploma.

B: So, it's not just a straight statistic then, like you had talked about earlier. This is a different animal in terms of tracking.

K: It is. I'm going to start out with 36 people in this room for first period class when the new quarter starts, October 24th. By the end of that 9-week period, I'll have less than half of them. But, the ones that drop might come back. And some will come back quickly and some I won't hear of for years. It depends on a lot of things: childcare; work; transportation; all that kind of stuff.

(We're now looking at Ms. Smith's working view on the computer screen showing her first period class. She walks me through the program step-by-step.)

This is my first period classroom this year. This is what it looks like. This is a great young man here. I'll use him as an example. I've put study modules in for everybody, in case they have to take the Gateway Tests; if they don't need them, they just ignore them. So *this* means this young man finished U.S. History in the spring of

2011. He finished *this* in the fall of 2011. And right now he's working on English II: that would be 10th grade English, first semester. And *this* is where he is. In English II, first semester, *these* are the lessons that he has to complete.

These lessons are Literature excerpts; the students don't read books in their entirety, for example they don't read all of *Great Expectations*. The way the program is set up, there's an introduction that tells about a book, why it's important in Western Literature etc. And, the first thing that a student will do is click on their chapter and the first thing it's going to give them is a pre-test: 10 questions; what do you know and what do you not know; it's like an introduction; it's just going to shoot 10 questions on this topic; What are analogies? And it'll say, "Cat is to dog what rain is to…whatever." and give them multiple choices, or something you type in and press Enter. So then you go to a study guide. And, let me show you what I do. Okay, here's my sample that I use for their orientation; I use World Geography. Okay, it'll give a pre-test that doesn't count on their grade. Then the next thing is the study guide. And this study guide is 15 pages long; it is just like reading a chapter of a book, except you're doing it on the computer. You scroll the pages like this, and you take notes on paper, and you make a notebook for yourself. There's a lot of literacy work involved in this.

B: So, they get practice writing, practice reading their writing, and then they are referred back to you for the review test?

K: Yes. And all the tests students take on A+ Software are open note tests: all tests,

including the final exam; they can take or re-take any test as often as needed to get a passing score. It's not about memorizing facts; it's about manipulating information, being able to look back and research; that's what the A+ Software makes possible. If somebody has to drop out for a while, their lessons are waiting for them when they come back. I will conclude and show you how they can go back; they can navigate to pages like this; after they've been in the study guide, the teacher can see that they've taken a pre-test.

We used to let people pass if they took a pre-test; we'd let them test out of chapters if they had good background knowledge. But we teachers discovered that people took advantage of this. Sometimes a student would work harder to cheat than to learn the information themselves. So, on the pre-test, for example, one student might ask another to see his Geography notebook, the one he's finished with but hasn't handed it in yet. That student could look through the other's notebook and answer questions on his pre-test based on the other student's notes, get his apple (the screen icon that appears when a task has been successfully completed), check it off his list, and get moved on to the next chapter. The problem with that, then, is they would flunk the review test because they had not done the work.

A student could also go to Ask.com and get solutions to Algebra problems. We have installed AB Tutor Control software that allows me to restrict the internet to certain websites. I make sure at the start of every day that the internet is limited to three sites: Google Translate, Babblefish, and Microsoft Translator. Help with translation is allowed; searching for an answer is not; and absolutely no cell phone use in the lab.

B: How would you compare this program to the regular high schools in the system?

K: This is a safety net for students who need it. Maybe it's not ideal for first time learning, but it is good for credit recovery. First-time learners are exposed to ideas and literature in a condensed format; it's not designed to be as in-depth as regular classes. But because this is an accredited school, there is enough here to not prevent someone from going further; some do actually go on to college. But, is it as good as the education I got? No.

On the other hand, I have had people say, "Dang, why didn't I listen to that battle axe teacher I had back at Antioch High School, because this is harder than if I had paid attention and gone to class while I was there. The difference here is they can't sit back and blame the teacher; they can't say Ms. Smith, you're boring; Ms. Smith, I don't like so and so. I'm the facilitator; the computers are the teacher; this is self-directed learning. Here they are accountable to themselves; some of them are not used to that.

Now that we can give them access to work at home where the internet is not restricted, for example, we've increased the weighting of their review test; it is half of their grade; it's their final exam and has questions from every chapter.

When a student comes in to take the test, it should be just him and his notebook. The tests are generated from a test bank; students taking the same test side-by-side answer randomly different sets of questions. If a student takes the practice test enough times, though, he will eventually see all the questions and all the answers. The

computer program provides immediate feedback; it'll tell you "Yay, good job." or "No, we don't agree." This is an excellent feature; it prompts the student to go back into his study guide to look up the right answer.

This is the exam and the review test (Ms. Smith is indicating both in the dropdown list on her computer). We do the best we can, but some students still try to game the system. Students are required to take the review tests here in the Lab in my presence, but I might be tutoring somebody at my desk; I could be out of the room; the bell could ring; a student who had not put in the time to take his own notes and make his own notebook might leave class early but still have electronic access to the review test and then go home and finish the test by opening up a laptop and looking the answers up online. I can make sure later when the student turns in their folder that the test was taken during school hours by looking at the time stamps recorded on the computer program.

The A+ program is set up to generate student reports as well. Let me pick somebody out. I think I had S_____ selected. OK. And I want to grade, say, her Biology. I can put the Assignment list at the top of it and the date, so I have a record of that, and her name at the top of it - select all the stuff I want on her report and then it'll print out like this; it'll show me the date, and the time, and I pick out all 20-something chapters, whatever it is. Biology, I think, has 9 chapters to it. I make sure she met a minimum of 350 out of 500. And then I shrink these columns, print it, and I have a record.

I'm going to add you to one of my classes and give you a pass code so you can log on and see what it's like yourself. I'm also going to give you the enrollment forms we

give a student who is coming to join us.

This is a school handbook; all students are given that one when they enroll. I've made up a lot of these forms to suit particular purposes – *there's* my contact information. *Here's* the course certificate; once they get their credit, I make it out, Bob Green: he finished Economics; this is what his final grade was; and then the counselor puts that on his transcript. *This* is something I made up to give them feedback; a student can put this on the refrigerator at home to show his accomplishments. *This* one helps students track what they make on their pre-tests, and then they practice, practice, practice; then they take their mastery test; one, two, three, four, five times; whatever it takes.

The whole purpose of developing *this one* was to show a student he's making progress; a student can't go to the next chapter until he's made at least an 80; nobody ends up with an average less than 80%. So, it's good for that. We insist that the students earn at least 1½ credits every semester. That puts them on track for graduating from our program on schedule.

The MNPS pacing guide says that if you're not an English Language Learner (ELL) and you're not Special Ed., you should work through at least 3 completed folders every 9 weeks and that's reasonable; it's very reasonable. And so we say if you need more than 2 hours a day, go home and work on it; if you need a tutor, find one.

If you have a second grade reading level, like a lady I had last week, you need to go upstairs to the Nashville Adult Literacy Council (NALC), do what they ask you to do, work with your tutor, and when you test at a higher level, come back and we'll be glad to

enroll you. So many people just want it now - “I’m going to graduate in January.” - “No ma’am, if you haven’t done the work, you’re not.”

B: How do you determine a person’s reading level when they come in?

K: We’re not set up to do reading assessments here. But when a lady says to me, “I’m struggling, I can’t read.” – I’m working with her; I can see that she has literacy problems; I refer her upstairs to NALC, on the 3rd floor. In that particular case, that’s what I did just recently. Later, I ran into Sarah Coode (the NALC Literacy Specialist) and Sarah told me that lady had followed through and she was glad to have her in the NALC program; that she was a really nice lady; she was just out having babies in high-school.

Regardless of circumstances, a lot of my students here are not “dumb,” they just have tons of gaps in their knowledge; they were in lock-up for a period of time; there are any number of scenarios – Math is particularly hard for substance abusers.

(Showing additional forms from the enrollment packet) So, *there’s* a pacing guide; I keep up with that. Okay, Bob, *this* is a very imperfect guide to how A+ works; it’s being revised right now; I start out with a summary of the rules; how to access A+, a description of the program, helpful hints, etc. It’s just become outdated; as of last month, A+ can now be accessed from home; I’ll revise it over fall break. Let me just add you to my class list and give you a pass code so you can review this (the A+ online software) later at home.

I will tell you we have two graduations a year, which are lovely events, if you

would ever like to attend. We have one here in the Cohn auditorium in May, and I'll make it a point to invite you, because it would just thrill your soul. I can see that you're passionate about this topic. It's fabulous; it's fun; it starts around 4 in the afternoon. There are a lot of victories here!

Some of our students are straight out of refugee camps – they come from all kinds of circumstances; some come from the housing projects around here. There are also some hoodlums who can't read their diploma; I'm not going to lie to you. But it took them years to get that way. I can't change it in two semesters, two hours a day. So, you name it; there it is.

After the graduation ceremony, the teachers give a reception for the families. Students can invite *all* their relatives if they want. We get these big ol' cakes from Costco, and the teachers serve, and we decorate the library, and we have a big time.

Students who finish in December graduate in January, and are pooled with all the other Metro mid-year graduates for a ceremony held at McGavock High School. We had a good showing from Cohn at the last couple of those ceremonies; using the A+ software helps us with that; if all a kid needs is one or two subjects, they can come in here in the afternoons; that also helps us toward the No Child Left Behind goals. So, the students here: if they can do the work, they're successful, but if they can't, about the only thing we can do is to refer them to NALC.

There is also a challenge for anybody who started 9th grade more than two years ago; those students have to pass Gateway Tests in English, Algebra and Biology; that's a daunting task for people who have been out of school 40 years; they may have

already had that coursework, but it was all those years ago. To get people who've been out of school for a really long time up to speed is a big deal; it takes a lot of time and effort. We worry about the impact the longer timelines have on our NCLB evaluation; it's a real concern.

In a nutshell, our program is fairly simple; we're not set up to be all things to all people; we have limits; students have to be able to read at a certain level to be successful here; students have to be able to manage themselves; some of the lessons are harder than others. But everybody that comes in gets to try. If they try and can't do the work, we look for some kind of support or resource here to offer them; we have some flexibility, like we talked about earlier. The Resource teacher and/or the Math and Science teacher may be able to give one of my students extra help; a change in their schedule or class time may help. We've had people say, "I just can't work with *him* in the room." Within our power, we do all we can to help students be successful here.

And if not, we refer them to NALC for reading help, to the Social Worker sometimes for different kinds of issues: case by case. We try not to get too policy driven because there's a real art to working in this kind of setting - Let's just say, especially with the young people here – there are so many interventions in Schools nowadays - I know I sound like an old codger, but back in the day, it was make it or break it in high-school. Schools were not real gentle about your needs, or your issues, or your visions. So, there comes a time when we shouldn't be ashamed to say, "You know, we have limits; we've done for you what we can do; you have enrolled and quit and re-enrolled and quit 8 semesters in a row, you're done." We make some of that up as we go.

There are more serious issues too; for instance: The Alternative School is upstairs - we have suspected strongly that there have been people who've enrolled in our program to meet those boys in the park from that program for drug deals. This is a big cavernous building and hard to police and secure. A student came to us, having passed all the Gateway Tests, needing just two classes, and after a year and a half he was still showing no progress – finally, I told the Guidance Counselor, "I'm telling you, he's a drug dealer." She said, "How do you know?" and I said, "Look on the Criminal Court Website; he's had 9 convictions for weapons and drugs; he's 20 years old and you see him in the park before and after school with Alternative School kids. What do you think?" Finally, a Police Officer arrested him. So, that took care of it. This is also a part of our reality.

Okay Bob - you should be okay on the log in. And if you go to Lessons, for me: click *that*; *there's* your subjects; I just randomly picked those things for you; there's also Gateway Practices - you take a diagnostic test, and based on your results it will drop the lessons in there that you need to study to be successful. Do you want some Gateways?

B: What are Gateways?

K: Gateways are State Tests required for graduation if you started high-school more than 2 years ago. They're doing away with them; they're now moving toward End-of-Course Tests, which is in addition to the final exam from the teacher - I don't get it - It's redundant, if you ask me.

So the Gateway Assessment, what did I put in there? - Algebra? - It's going to randomly throw Algebra problems to you, and then based on how you perform, it will give you lessons tailored to what you need: concepts that you missed, that you need work on. Now, the Math Teacher doesn't really like the Algebra Gateway Practices on here because they're random and not sequential, but I haven't heard any complaints about the Biology or English I.

When you have students here, like we do, who can't speak or write any English when they start the program: it's very hard for foreign-born people to pass these tests. And if you think about it, people born and bred in this country, that grew up speaking English, sometimes can't pass English; what do you think it's like for someone from a Third World country?

With my thanks, we left it there.

Place: Residence

Date: 6 Oct. 2011.

Interviewed: Ms. Jeannie Sharp

Recording Device: Olympus WS-300M Digital Voice Recorder

Transcription: Bob Green

Our extemporaneous conversation has been formatted and edited for readability.

BG = Bob Green JS = Jeannie Sharp

Ms. Sharp and I spoke candidly throughout; specific remarks, germane to the larger, ongoing conversation in the field of Education, but outside the scope of this paper, were not included by mutual agreement.

BG: Did you start out as a reading teacher?

JS: No, I started out in Special Ed. and stayed in it. I'll be a 30-year Special Ed. Teacher after next year.

BG: That's more to my point than just reading. In Special Ed., don't you have a reading component?

PI: There is a huge reading component in Special Ed; we offer in-depth reading lessons. We break reading down into its separate skills using a process called task analysis. In Special Ed., we don't assume that anything is automatically acquired knowledge for the students. We know that automaticity has to be programmed by repetition; we don't just assume that our children are picking up information from the things they see in their

everyday life or the early words they hear at home and should pick up on, as other children do: for example, names of restaurants, names on cereal boxes, names for all the things kids are used to seeing and hearing.

If parents, especially those with Special Ed. children, or Exceptional Needs Children they're called now, do not expose their kids to speech and vocabulary very early-on, then the kids come to school that much further behind. Some children cannot make sense of a thing unless someone breaks it down into smaller steps for them. And that really needs to start early, for example: with colors it's as simple as, "This is red; this is black; this is white."

That's what we do for Exceptional Ed. students; we take things just that simple and breaking them down into pieces. You don't *assume* with a Special Ed. child. You have to teach every skill step by step: math skills, social skills, personal behavior, recognizing personal space, conversation - things like that - how to have a conversation.

Reading starts out with the letters of the alphabet, but it also starts by early recognition of an object. Some of the first things children see are their toys: a doll or a toy plane or a toy truck. They need to learn to associate the words they hear with the toys they can see; they have to be taught to connect the auditory with the visual. So, if you see the kid playing with a toy, you shouldn't just leave her alone with it, she needs someone to help her make sense of it and then to help her associate the toy with the word for the toy. If parents are paying attention, this starts long before they get to school. So, reading starts by introducing kids to a vocabulary, early-on.

I love it when parents expose their kids to music - jazz music, rhythm music, classical music - in the womb; and also read to their child in the womb. It doesn't matter what book they read, as long as they read with rhythm and not mechanically.

As long as the parents read with expression, the baby feels the rhythm; the baby feels the sounds. And of course the music helps the parent relax, which makes the baby relax. But it also gives the baby continuity - the brain begins to develop in the womb; hearing sounds helps it develop. When the baby's born, and hears the sounds it has heard before, it feels safe, comfortable; the baby relates the sounds it hears now to those sounds it already knows - to its prior knowledge.

If you can keep this process going and start attaching words to objects, children will develop their ability to associate. Then, when the child begins to do his ABCs, and he begins to put /b/ (the sound of the letter b) together with the sounds of other letters when he sees a ball, he will learn to make the connection, "Oh, this is a ball." It's very helpful if children are taught the alphabet and how to associate words with objects way before they ever get ready to go to school.

As far as the kids who don't benefit by this kind of early engagement, when they get to school and into Special Ed., they may not have learned all of the alphabet, but they can learn to recognize pictures that go with a concept - this kind of thing - point to a picture; tell me what it is. That's the beginning of auditory literacy. If the child doesn't recognize what's in the picture, even if he could read the word, it wouldn't connect; it wouldn't make a picture in his mind. That's what reading needs to do; that's what math

needs to do. One of the hottest concepts in math right now is to make it create pictures in children's minds.

If I read a story to you, it creates visual images in your mind while you hear it. Well, when you read it yourself, it needs to do the same thing. Reading should be like watching a TV program in your head; same thing with math; when you see that number, it needs to create a visual image in your mind. Visualizing makes mental math much easier; it helps with reasoning; it helps with real-world problem solving; it helps with spelling. Even though we used to teach it separately, we have not taught spelling as a separate subject in the schools for the last several years. I consider that a damage to the system.

BG: How do you determine whether or not a child is a Special Ed. candidate when they come to Metro Schools? How does that process work?

JS: If disabilities or deficits are noted, the School can intervene on behalf of a child as early as three years old. The School will provide a range of evaluations: cognitive, to determine mental functioning and how well the child reacts to its environment; visual acuity; hearing; speech. If losses are noted in any of those categories, testing for each is available, and later on, when the child gets into the school system, many times they'll be given an IQ test, the results of which are compared to the norm for other kids their age across the nation. If there is a 16 point difference in IQ, and they have a deficit in their language processing, they are considered to have a learning disability.

In the case of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) a doctor will be involved. there's a whole set of checklists that the doctor fills out, the parent fills out, the

teacher fills out - the school psychologist does an interview with the student. Ultimately with ADHD it's a doctor's diagnosis, but what we in Special Ed. look at is the effect the child's disorder will have on him in an academic setting.

BG: At three years old, if it's noticed by their doctor, would the child go someplace like Peabody or the Kennedy Center or -

JS: They could do that. They could also go to their local school: their zoned school. There are school psychologists at every school now; that psychologist may serve a cluster of schools, but parents can go to their zoned school. If the child is as young as three years old, many times the psych evaluator will come to the home.

BG: Paid for by the local school system?

JS: Yes, paid for through the local school system and through federal funds. This generally saves the parent around $500.

BG: The parent would receive this free of charge?

JS: Correct: Now, if the parent disagrees with the findings of the Public School System about this evaluation, the parent has the right to get an independent diagnosis. If proof is shown that the child had a disability and it was missed by the psych evaluator, it's my understanding that the school system will pay for that extra testing. If not, it's up to the parent or their health insurance to pay for the second evaluation.

BG: Do you think people are widely aware of the level of evaluation and testing that is available to them?

JS: They have to be. At three years old, the publications start going out to pediatrician's offices, to hospitals, to schools; to student's homes; brochures go home with the kids at the beginning of each year that offer testing for younger siblings. There are ads on television; there are newspaper ads; there are magazine ads, and there is a constant child-find service going on year round. There's really no reason for parents not to know. This information campaign has been in place a little over 12 years.

BG: So, is it the feeling among educators that they're doing a good job identifying children at the three-year-old age mark?

JS: It is getting much better. Although it has taken awhile for it to sink in, we can see the message is getting out because problems are being acknowledged much more at the younger ages. We are getting those kids in schools when they're 4, turning 5 now. Twelve to 15 years ago, it would take until they were in the 5-year-old to kindergarten, to first, and even to second grade range before children would come in to get services or even to get tested.

BG: So this would be in Pre-K, and then there's an outreach to the -

JS: Pre-K is 4 years old. So this is even before Pre-K.

BG: So a parent's interface is at the physician's office; if problems are noticed, the parent contacts the school and then going forward the school will keep in touch with the parent and child.

JS: Absolutely; children with either a disability or an exceptionality - children at both ends of the spectrum - come under the Public School umbrella. Once in the

Exceptional Education Program, children are followed with yearly meetings, but meetings can occur more often if something in the program needs to be changed. If the child meets her goals, she needs further goals; starting when she's three years old. If the child has a need, a program is set up with goals to meet those needs, and a therapist is provided to work with the parent and child to achieve them.

BG: So, parent education too: there's a focus on parents.

JS: Absolutely: a lot of great resources are available through the RIP Program over on Belmont Blvd. A lot of parents take advantage of that. It's a very good learning program. We have RIF readers from the Reading is Fundamental Program, and they come into the schools even at the kindergarten level. They provide extra exposure to literature, free books - the whole 9 yards. There is the Governor's Books from Birth Foundation[1] that partners with Dolly Parton's Imagination Library to see that free books are mailed once a month directly to kids' homes until age five; parents can access that through the Web.

But, the minute the parent comes to the School System and says, "We suspect our child has a problem," the School System says, "We're going to test your child." A meeting is set up with a Metro Psychometrist for testing, and if there is an exceptionality or a problem, the psychometrist, the parents, and the director of whatever area, get together and work out an Individual Education Plan (IEP) for the child. If the first plan doesn't fully meet the child's needs, the group meets again to change it, tweak it, improve it; sometimes to erase it and start all over. That IEP will then be updated yearly.

Every three years the child is re-evaluated. After a second re-evaluation - that means the child would have been in the system for six years – there is likely enough information in the child's record to show whether he still meets qualifying criteria without another cycle of re-evaluation and testing: his Academic Records, State-mandated testing results, the TCAP test, ThinkLink Test, and the Discovery Test etc.

Some children start out with one kind of disability, but as their school careers progress, pressures build, and the work becomes more demanding, other disabilities begin to show. When this happens, we ask the psychometrist to test again with a broader range. A child's growth and development are affected by many things: lack of structure at home; poor diet, or the wrong diet in case of certain food allergies; Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) might mask other disabilities that may only show up later; we have seen so many different scenarios. A child with a learning disability may also test as gifted: very high IQ, but underperforming because of difficulty processing information.

BG: I have heard, anecdotally, over the years, about people who didn't come into the school system that cleanly: kids who made it in, advanced some number of grades, were identified and transitioned into Special Ed., and then did not do well.

JS: I've been in the system 28 years now, and even though it's happening less in the last 5 years than at any time up to that point, it still happens.

BG: Due to the extensive outreach and the early catch?

JS: And a thing called “Inclusion,” mandated by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. Prior to implementing Inclusion, a lot of kids got skipped and there are some reasons for that. Maybe the parents didn’t pursue the testing and help that was available; that’s a possibility. Even though a child had a deficit and was struggling with homework at home and had trouble listening or paying attention in the classroom, his IQ test results might show less than a 16 point deficit from the norm, and he couldn’t qualify for services; we used to call those, “crack” kids: not methamphetamine “crack,” but kids who fell through the cracks. They absolutely needed the extra one-on-one help or one-to-small-group help immediately but it was only later, as their deficits grew to meet the category guidelines, they would be put in Special Ed., somewhere between the 3rd and 5th grades; by that time they had already experienced 4 or 5 years of failure.

I was doing Inclusion in Wilson County, when I was there, from 1988 and on; Metro has begun to do it with an extreme push in the last few years because of NCLB; most of the kids are supposed to be mainstreamed or included completely by 2013.

BG: Those early years are also the critical period for reading?

JS: *The* most; used to be Kindergarten; now, Pre-K kids are expected to know their alphabet before they leave and to begin to read basic sight words and early CVC words, consonant-vowel-consonant words: dog, cat - simple words.

If a child struggles year after year, falls behind, feels like a failure, he will say, “I can’t do this anymore.” Once he gets into Special Ed., we have to overcome that, we have to get “can’t” out of his vocabulary before he can begin to make progress; because progress *can* be made. So, absolutely, it’s those beginning years,

BG: Does anybody, once in the program under those circumstances, ever make it back out?

JS: I mainstream a great deal of children, absolutely! - When I was teaching in Middle School, not so much. The best place to make a difference in a child's life and get them back in the General Ed. classroom is in Elementary School. One of the best strategies we have is instead of that child coming out into my separate room, I go into their room. That way, there is a General Ed. teacher teaching the basic curricula; I'm there to help modify it, re-teach it, re-explain it, show it a different way to help 2 or 3 or however many Exceptional Ed. kids are in that room *plus* any General Ed. kids that might be struggling, the ones that fell through the cracks. And then, since I'm certified in Gifted Ed., I can also help the higher end guys, the one's that need more push, need to go in a different direction. This is where collaboration between the Gen. Ed. teacher and the Exceptional Ed. teacher is really important.

BG: So, you would meet with those teachers and they would give you the list based on their own observations, or does it go the other way?

JS: It goes the other way. I still meet with the teachers, but I tell them which of the kids they have that have special needs, and what those needs are, and how they need to modify their lesson plans, or how they're teaching them, or how they can better address the child's needs: that kind of thing. And then I help them be able to do that; give them extra resources, help take their lesson plan and say, "Okay, Can we substitute this component for him? Let's find another way to assess him because he doesn't do well, maybe, on a pencil/paper test; he doesn't do well on 'clicker' tests" - that's a test with

written questions shown on the overhead that you click your answer A, B, C, D to a multiple-choice question. If we know he's just guessing, we need to find another way for him to show his knowledge. It might be for him to make a project, or create something physically, manually, to show what he's learning.

Many times these assessments, these different kinds of things, might happen in my pull-out room because it's less distracting to the General Ed. classroom. And the kids feel better because their peers are not seeing them have to do different things – especially if it's something completely different than what everybody else is doing. Many times I try to get to teachers - and all the Special Ed. teachers do this, not just me particularly - but if you can get teachers to do a different kind of assessment for the whole class, it takes the focus off the Exceptional Ed. Students. Then you let the kids show you a product; you've got their knowledge of the concept, you have their application of the concept; it's not just something on a piece of paper they've memorized for the moment.

Generally speaking, Exceptional Ed. students will do much better in that kind of setting. If you're talking about Geography and talking about mountains and basins and plains, they can take a cardboard box and build every one of those features and have them in the right shapes and label them and it's much more indicative of their understanding of "Where would you find a basin?" than a traditional pencil/paper test. It's hands-on; it's tactile; it makes the brain work.

Many times our Exceptional Ed. kids are not great auditory learners. They need to see things; they need to feel things; they need to have a tactile connection to what

they're learning. That goes all the way down to learning their alphabet – they need to physically make it with their bodies, trace it with tracing paper or write it in shaving cream – a student can learn the sound as he's doing the letter with his hand. It's across-center-line movement learning; you feel it physically; the movement activates or re-connects both sides of the brain. This is something that needs to be used all the way through, with everything these kids learn. All the way to high-school; all the way to the AP classes; if kids use movements that cross the vertical center line of the body visually, auditorily, and physically it improves their comprehension; it helps things stick.

BG: Is progress ever stopped for these kids along the way, in terms of resources, as the learning gets more complex? Is that an issue?

JS: Oh absolutely, absolutely. Every school system is limited in its funds. We provide the very best service we can based on how many kids we have and what monies we have available. What we can offer is a Chevy model; not a junkyard Chevy; we might even be able to offer a new Chevy, but we can't offer a Cadillac; we can't offer a Lamborghini. If you go private, you get more of everything: technology; individualized resources, literally one-to-one; but you're going to pay for it.

We can't do that in the Public School System. There's no way; if I have 15 kids there are not 15 hours in a day. And that's if each kid gets one hour. If I work with them in small groups, some kids can get 3 hours, and they still benefit by learning to work together among their peers. I've had groups of 15-25; that still works as long as I individualize the teaching, do more hands-on, do creative things beyond just opening a book and having them listen to me talk, expecting them to take notes; How are they

going to take notes from a teacher, talking? In the first place, they can't write and if they could they couldn't write fast enough; it takes too long to think, to process, to feel. To be successful they need to work with the material in a different way, like we talked about; that way it's going to stick. And I am able to do that in a small group; I can even do it in a Gen. Ed classroom if I work with a teacher who is willing to help.

There are some organizational issues too. The number of kids in the classrooms increased to 30 this year and the number of teachers decreased. The decision was to use additional Educational Assistants - we don't call them Aides anymore - in place of certified teachers. The Exceptional Ed. and Gen. Ed. teachers collaborate on how to use the Educational Assistant. But, if the Gen Ed teacher feels intimidated by having another adult in their classroom or is reluctant to share control and chooses not to use the Aide or to use her in a limited way, her best efforts are wasted and the kids are not well served; there needs to be two adults in the classroom working in a partnership.

When you get a teacher-teacher or teacher-assistant team working well together, that's the *best* environment. It's better than one-to-one. One-to-one, a child only learns how to work with one person helping them; they don't have a chance to learn from a teacher's general directions and they don't have a chance to learn from their peers; they don't have a chance to learn to interact in a group situation, small or large.

Many kids need one-to-one, that's great in small doses, but ultimately you want them to be able to work well in a General Ed. setting. And that's not one-to-one. If you give them that one-to-one setting too often, it becomes a crutch for them. When that happens and the child goes into the Gen. Ed. classroom, that child won't do anything

until that teacher comes to him and says, “Why aren’t you working?” and “You need to do x-y-z.” When that happens, that child just got personal, one-to-one service; that child didn’t listen to his teacher the first time because he knew she would eventually come to him; that’s his crutch.

So, that’s a challenge; if a child is in our Special Ed. pull-out program, the goal is to get him into the Gen. Ed. program; to do that successfully, he has to learn to listen to a teacher directing him as a part of a group instead of waiting for the teacher to come to him one-on-one; the need to learn by listening is the same in a 1-4 group as it is in a 1-20 group.

BG: Have you found that the kids use these same coping strategies at home and that’s something that works against their making headway at school?

JS: Right - absolutely; home is a big part of it. If I’ve got good communication going with the parent and the parent is willing to work with their child at home, these are the kinds of things I share with them: Your child learns best by doing, and this is what I want you to try to do to help him at home. Try to set up his life so that he’s got set times to do things, a set time to do dishes, take out the trash; he needs to be responsible at home as well as at school. He needs to be able to manage his time; time management is a skill he hasn’t learned yet and he needs guidelines and timelines to help him. He needs the same step-by-step approach we use in school. He needs to have it broken down and given to him in chunks and to be shown *how* to do it; he won’t be able to do it automatically.

He will have to do it as an adult, even in the very basic of jobs. You know, McDonalds doesn't say, "You've got all day long to get that one hamburger fixed." He will have to meet demands and meet them on time to be able to run his life. Learning to do this starts early on. It can be as simple as telling him to pick up his toys before he pulls out another one. It's teaching him to listen to an adult and follow a directive. That carries over: into school; into work; and then into the kid's life on his own.

BG: So, initiative is something that these kids lack, based on their coping skills?

JS: Correct. It's also generational; parents or grandparents have the same or similar problems with reading or math or whatever else it might be. Family members may have had very bad experiences in the old educational system; they weren't expected to meet standards; they weren't expected to graduate; they weren't expected to put out writing; they weren't expected to learn their times tables because the attitude was, "Oh, poor pitiful thing." We're moving past that now.

Up until 5 or 6 years ago, when a child qualified for Special Ed., that child was taken off the General Ed. teacher's class roll. The child still spent the major part of his day in the General Ed. room, but the Special Ed. teacher was expected to take over all responsibility for his grades and academic teaching. Generally, in Special Ed., the child was taught Reading and the Language Arts and Math and sat in the General Ed. class for Lunch, PE, and Social Studies or Science. A conscientious Special Ed. teacher would take responsibility for getting the child back on grade level.

A better strategy would have been for the General Ed. teacher to be responsible for the child, have the same expectations for him as the Special Ed. teacher had, and

for the child to be held accountable in both places. Children know behaviorally and academically when they are wanted in a classroom and when they are expected to perform. As it was, the child essentially had a free getaway place, "OK, great; I'm through working in there; now I can go over here and go to sleep." Inclusion has definitely cut down on that kind of thing, but it still happens, especially in some of the upper grades, because the work is more difficult.

BG: In terms of those expectations: how far off of the goals set for a Gen. Ed. student are the goals set for an Exceptional Ed. student?

JS: Exceptional Ed. students with minor learning disabilities are expected to meet grade level standards and come out with a General Ed. diploma. The overall goal is to have as many as possible do so. Students with physical impairments, visual impairments and hearing impairments are provided with whatever they need to meet their needs and do well; some come out with AP diplomas.

It's different for kids with cognitive impairments. Kids who are extremely limited may only get an Attendance Diploma; they will still have to come to school and meet certain standards, along the lines of the students at Harris Hillman; and they will still graduate when they finish 12th grade.

BG: Is it possible to teach everybody to read, write and comprehend in the 12 years?

JS: Yes, but the three are so interlocked that you will never be a good reader if one of those three components is missing. Like we talked about at the beginning, the process

of learning the separate skills starts early and at home and some children come to school with more home support than others.

BG: What kind of a gap do you think that is in terms of years?

JS: We try to catch the kids up before they leave the Elementary setting, but many times there is a two to three year gap by the time Exceptional Ed. kids get to Middle School.

BG: I've read recent statistics showing a predicted workforce deficit that we'll have in Nashville in the near future - the pool of available people here in Nashville will not have the skills for the jobs that are going to be available. And literacy is a big part of that.

JS: Kids need to learn how to read well, how to comprehend well, and how to use what they read in their real life in the K-4 years; K-4 is the time to learn *how* to read because starting in the 5th grade, school curricula focus on presenting the academic information; the information that kids need to be able to read and understand in order to learn. Basic reading skills need to be in place before the child can master content.

Things are changing; we have been told that a child is not to leave 4th grade now without being on a certain proficiency level. To get there, the schools are trying a blended program where kids have got to master certain skills before they finish the 4th grade. This kind of approach gives the teachers and students leeway to keep working on the skills as the students are developing and moving through their Elementary School years. This is a more constructive approach than having a hard separation

between what's taught and tested, within the strict timelines bounded by the ends of the 1st, the 2nd, and the 3rd grade school years.

BG: If we identify children who cannot read by a point certain, how are those kids, then, able to get past that point?

JS: If kids are not up to grade level at that point, they are given more individualized help, both Exceptional Ed. and General Ed. students across the board. There are some other things we can do: some schools have set up programs during the week of fall break and encourage kids to come in for help from instructional coaches. Some districts in surrounding counties have gone to the 9-2, year-round schedule; Metro has been working toward that too. During the two-week-off periods, students who need it come to school to make up some of their deficit; the teachers are paid, and for them it's like teaching summer school.

BG: Do children fail grades anymore?

JS: Yes; it's not very often, but yes they do.

BG: And when they do?

JS: It is very frowned upon. It is very strongly emphasized for children not to repeat. That's mainly because the literature and research that decision-makers reference shows that if a child is retained more than once, that child will drop out before they graduate high school.

BG: Is keeping a child back something you have control over?

JS: As a teacher, you don't. Now if you can show positively that that child has not made grade level standards and will probably not make them without another complete year of exposure, then, you have validation for repeating that child. The final decision is up to the Principal.

If you've got a kid that's a complete year behind, and you repeat them for that whole year, then you've wasted quite a bit of time. A child's teacher can arrange for interim summer school placements to help bring that child up - and those opportunities are available, especially if the child is in Exceptional Ed.

If parents are willing and able and agree to get the child help, the school can offer to test the child at the beginning of the next school year to see that the child has brought his skills up to the next level over the summer. If the child cannot pass the test when he comes in, he would have to repeat for the year; that option is there.

BG: So, it's very difficult for the child to go back through a grade.

JS: It is hard. Repeating a grade is hard emotionally on a child. Now, if the child is very immature, holding them back one time in early Elementary, allows them an extra year to mature; it can boost their self-confidence and cement the really vital skills that they need; it can help them soar. Some kids start Kindergarten as early 5-year-olds and because they're immature, they constantly struggle with the work. We don't want a child to have to feel like a salmon swimming upstream in Elementary School; there are too many other challenges waiting for them in middle and then in high school where it's easy to drop out. That's a problem in the urban schools.

BG: They have a pretty high dropout rate.

JS: Ours is lowering in Metro. It's not great; it's not satisfactory by any means, but it's lower than it was a few years ago.

BG: I still wonder about how people get through the entire system, by whatever means, without being able to decode a page of words at a very basic level. What are your thoughts on how that happens?

JS: Okay: It may be the child is in a situation that no matter what he does, it's just not happening for him; he's failed the first time, knows he can't fail again, but does not have the inner motivation to do better; he also may not have any push from his parent, or he may have parent-push and be rebelling against it. Whether his problems are mental or physical or whatever, sometimes a child has no inner motivation, no inner drive instilled in him: there are children like that.

There are other children that just keep pushing that line - "I'm just not going to do it; I don't have to." Those kids don't look at what's happening to them and see the need to help themselves; it's like making a kid do dishes who doesn't want to do them; they don't make the connections, see the line of reasoning. Well, you've got to have clean dishes if you want to eat off of them again; it's the same for why the kid needs an education: I don't need this; I can go flip burgers; I can go build a house; I don't need to learn how to read. Well, you do if you want to function in society - read the paper, balance a checkbook – sometimes it's cash only, living week to week; their parents live that way; their grandparents live that way; it was good for them, it's good for me; and they don't read. There are still people in our society that don't have to learn how to read.

BG: That would be some of them, not succeeding based on a multigenerational set of values; that's a pretty strong force for the teacher to fight.

JS: That would be some of them. There are other kids that cannot make the cognitive connections from a letter to a word, a word to a sentence, a sentence to a story; it just cannot sink in; there's a visual block there; those kids have an extreme learning disability; they literally do not have the letter-decoding ability – it's physical, it doesn't happen in their brain, and some of these are Exceptional students. They can function in society, but they can't read.

BG: That's a smaller group?

JS: That's a smaller group than those that lack the drive. And then there are those that just *rebel* against it; that just rebel against somebody giving them a directive and making them do something.

BG: So, they *could* learn, but it's an emotional immaturity, an emotional issue holding them back?

JS: Yes, absolutely. Do you see a lot of kids, recently, going back and getting their GEDs? There are. There is a larger drive now than there used to be of people going back to get their GED or trying for a regular high school diploma. And that's because they have gone through the social realm and finally come to terms with the reasons they had for not wanting to spend the time to learn when they were in school, or not wanting to spend the time at home practicing their skills.

Now it's important for them. They had the cognitive ability, and now they're going to go back and use it. They're going to go back and put themselves through the hoops and learn how to read and how to study - and get a graduation diploma.

There is also some gang influence in the schools from Middle School on: you can be successful, rich, and you do not need to go to school to do that because we have a job for you. And you can start today. And it pays well. A lot of students -and I would say more today than ever in history - don't see themselves having a future; they don't see next year as a viable option, much less think, "Oh, I'm going to be going to college." There are less and less kids that think of themselves as having a future.

BG: That's a very strong point.

JS: They don't: even from this high. (Indicating the height of a small child) What do you want to be when you grow up? "I don't know." is one theme; there's nothing there besides the "I don't know."

NOTE: Ms. Sharp asked to take a short break at this point in the conversation; when we resumed, it was by my error that the wrong button was pushed and her final words were not recorded. I shared this with her and she graciously sent me the statement below via email to add in summary and it has been added verbatim.

A child has to have vision for him or herself. That vision may not stay the same, but without it they have a limited future. A parent's job is to foster that vision and put more vision possibilities in their mind. A teacher's job is to encourage those visions with knowledge of how and where to achieve those "goals" or visions. A communities' job is to make available resources to achieve and fulfill those visions and to further expand those horizons. When the child reaches that vision it is their responsibility to help the next generation to fulfill their visions and carry on a productive society. That concept being in an ideal world; nevertheless, it is each person's role to add to their society and make it a productive one. When one or more of these chains break down the whole is hurt and weakened. It is imperative that not only is the concept of having a vision essential to teach your child, but also the responsibility of being a productive citizen and an independent thinker.

Reading and math skills are essential in the formative years before the child enters school. Reading is much more than words and numbers, even when a child begins to recognize words and their meanings. Often times word meanings are known way before the word is recognized when a child is exposed to language spoken with meaning and expression. Language limited by too much visual, i.e. TV, video games, x-box, etc. can be limiting a child's imagination and vision. They only have to see not use their imagination or reasoning skills. Both of which are vital to a healthy and productive citizen. It is a teacher's responsibility to ensure that both the imagination and the reasoning are heightened every day in the best learning style of the child. There are auditory, visual, kinesthetic, and combination of these types of learners in every

classroom and in every home. Therefore one shoe size and one presentation style does not fit all.

A child's success as a learner starts before they are ever born. It starts with a parent's vision and preparedness, a teacher's vision and preparedness and a community of family, businesses, cultural activities, and physical fitness activities to make every child have opportunities to reach their vision. In years past it was enough to have a single vision and stay with that for the duration of your working years. In this day and time one is not enough. People find themselves working several careers in their lifetime and living longer than ever before. As a society we have to expand our single minded teaching to encompass this wider range and need of people. Plan well, begin early, nurture continuously, and reap great rewards. Is this just a reading technique or a life technique!

Place: Vanderbilt University, Wilson Hall, Room 305

Date: 28 Oct. 2011.

Interviewed: Ms. Maxine Kelly

Recording Device: Olympus WS-300M Digital Voice Recorder

Transcription: Bob Green

Our extemporaneous conversation was formatted and edited for readability. Time stamps have been added for reference.

BG = Bob Green MK = Maxine Kelly

(0:05:43.0)

BG: I wonder if you would be kind enough to give a little background on your involvement with adult literacy in Florida and then let that segue into how you came to Nashville.

MK: I can start with my move to Florida. We moved to Florida from Atlanta and before that we lived in Canada. My job in Canada was working with kids, with disturbed kids, but part of my role there was to work in the school system. It was when I started working in the School System that I began to see the relationship between emotional states and learning: the connection between families and learning and how things in the family can affect the child's learning.

When we moved to Florida, I accepted a position as a recruiter. My role was to recruit and work with single parents and displaced homemakers: men or women, who did not have the basic educational skills to support their families. Our project was funded by Carl Perkins Grants: federal monies sent down to each state, and then

distributed in the basic adult education system. Part of this money was set aside - I think it was $1 for every $100 - for each single parent and displaced homemaker. I applied for a grant every year to get these funds.

As part of our program, I enrolled new students, first, into adult basic education programs, free of charge. Most had not attended high school, had become mothers along the way, left home, and were now receiving welfare assistance. Once students attained a certain basic level of proficiency, they would test for one of the vocational programs.

Most of those women wanted to go into business. And I jokingly said to one of them one day, “You cannot go into business until you can learn how to say business,” because she would say “bidnis.” So, I said no; we need to look at your skill level. Part of that was to take two vocational tests: first was the Apticom; it dealt strictly with eye-hand coordination, basic large and small motor skills; second was the TABE (Test for Adult Basic Education); most students tested out around grade 3-4 when they joined the program.

Our adult education person worked on basic reading skills and our vocational people worked on basic repetitive skills; I tested regularly and coordinated with the teachers to let them know how students were progressing at given points along the way.

In order to get monies for the adult basic education program, the person running the classes had to predict how many units each student would complete over every period. If student progress didn’t match the prediction, we lost that money from the

grant. Our program was well organized and very outcome based. If we weren't cutting it, we didn't get the funds.

Many times we started out with very high expectations. We came to realize that learning would always be slow in the beginning, but that after a student reached a certain point in her ability to read, her progress would increase dramatically. We also realized that a student's progress was based on motivation; if she did not have to learn to read, why should she?

In these students' lives, no attempt had been made along the way to develop in them a love for reading; they weren't interested. They wanted to learn only as much as they had to: how to sign their names; how to read traffic signs well enough to get a driver's license. Some had even paid other people to take the written test for them. There are so many ways people compensate for not being able to read.

I became so interested in the process by which these people had come to be in their present circumstances and enthusiastic to know more about how to help, that I decided to get a degree in Adult Education; so much so that I enrolled in a Master's Program at the University of South Florida (USF) and got a few courses under my belt toward that degree; then we moved.

When I got to Nashville, I looked around for an Adult Education Program in which to continue my studies, but could not find one at any of the Universities. So, I had to start all over; as you know, I finally enrolled in the MLAS Program here at Vanderbilt. But I'm hoping that somewhere along the line I can still pursue my passion for adult education.

I don't believe enough people liked learning or were given the opportunity to enjoy learning early in their lives; for those people, learning has never been a pleasant thing. And it's amazing, even if someone is over 40 or 50 when they learn to read, how much it changes their whole life; and I would like to do that; I don't know how I'm going to do it, but once I finish the MLAS Program, I hope that I will get a chance to do something, somehow.

(0:16:05.0)

BG: Can you elaborate a little on that idea that once someone learns how to read it changes their whole life, in terms of how you saw that play out?

MK: I was not directly a part of the ABE program; I worked on their periphery, providing support for the students. I helped them find day care for their kids; I went with them to doctor visits; I had a supporting role.

BG: That's critical work

MK: It was. I felt almost like a parent who was trying to encourage her children to go to school in a lot of ways. For example, one of the things I did was to start a lunch time, mother-and-child book club. The students would pick up their kids, because the day care centers were close by, and I would provide as healthy a lunch as I could, and the kids would bring a book because the schools were pushing reading at school; I would start out reading, then I'd have the kids go around and read, and then I'd have the parents go around and read. I saw those mothers enjoy what they were doing; this

helped them feel that they were learning something of value in our program that they could give to their children.

After that success, my next step was to have a reading club just for the mothers. I chose books that would probably mirror their own experiences: Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,* was a dead-on book. And I didn't just have them read; I got the book on tape. I had us just listen the first time through; they had their books, they could follow if they wanted to; they just listened and followed. These students were learning that skill: to listen.

Once we got halfway through the book, I turned the tape off. They were already churning about what would happen next and we were going to have to find out. So, we took turns while the rest of the group followed along; everybody got a chance to try; reading out loud to the group helped them realize that they could do it. I had other Maya Angelou books that just flew off the shelves, I never got them back, which was okay with me; it was just so wonderful to be a part of this.

BG: That's success.

MK: Of that group of women, I think two of them went on to college, which I never could have expected in my wildest dreams. Not everyone got that far, but most of them got their GED, and learned a trade, as they call it.

By the way, I don't think the thought process we use to make that kind of a distinction is a fair one; some people were born wanting to do certain kinds of work. Many people think that vocational work is dummy work. That exasperates me: the whole

expectation of Academia hanging over our heads as the one benchmark of success; because of that, people who want to pursue other careers many times get lost in the shuffle and then they get so discouraged.

In that group of women, I had two who became top notch mechanics. One was a bi-lingual, Hispanic mom, born and raised in Michigan, who had 6 kids by the age of 22; she had never had a job. Because she joined our program and learned to read, learned to slay that dragon, she was able to get and hold down a job as manager of the Auto Zone in our town. She had been fooling around with cars all of her life and was good at it. So, by the time she had the content backing, the reading part, she was able to take the next step, to be able to do it in a class - I remember her instructor saying to me, "She is amazing; her hands are small and she can get into all the little nooks and crannies and she knows things; she can feel it." He was happy to recommend her to Auto Zone.

BG: That's the kind of story that really demonstrates the tragedy of illiteracy. There are people among us without a connection to their own positive future. After hearing a story like that, it seems that what she did is so doable.

MK: It's hard work though. There was another student who came to us because she needed to get a job. Although she told us she had a high school diploma, she had just been passed along through the system. She was intellectually challenged, but she turned out to be a first class welder. She didn't know anything about welding when I first tested her, but the Apticom results showed she would be good in areas of intense small work, working intermittently over a period of time. When we toured the vocational areas

she said, “I like the one with the fire.” And that was it, she welded big pieces of metal; there was no intricacy, no complexity. It was wonderful to see these students uncover their skills, to see them feel validated and empowered to do them because now they could read.

(0:27:15.0)

BG: Those are very good stories about real people whose lives were changed for the better.

MK: And not just for them; for their kids. Can you imagine these students’ kids, who were living in a kind of barren environment? As their parents learned to read, they took a totally different approach to the things happening around them. They were not only learning to read, we were teaching them how to be creative, to solve problems. They said, “Ms. Kelly, I don’t have money to take my kid to the fair or whatever. I said, “Then do something else, inexpensive, at home.” Think about the things your child likes to do; can you bake with her?

BG: They were learning another skill: problem solving.

MK: Right, but that’s what reading is, isn’t it, decoding. It all goes hand and hand. Learning to read opens up everything.

BG: It’s easy to see that you are still engaged and passionate about the subject of literacy and about the possibilities for yourself going forward. I didn’t ask before; how long have you and your family been in Nashville?

MK: Six years in December.

BG: So, had there been a program in place when you arrived in Nashville, you would have graduated and would be involved in the world of literacy training now.

MK: You see, I have a picture of myself; I must have been about 5 or 6, and in the picture, I'm holding a book like this (with the spine up) and I am crying. I can still remember that day. My mom wanted me to read and I wanted to go out and play and I was so mad that I was really crying because I really did not want to read. She gave me the picture when I was about 15, I think, and said "Do you remember this day?" and I said, "Yes, I can't believe Daddy took a picture of me." "I just want you to remember it," she said.

I grew up in Latin America, in Panama, and I learned to speak, read, and write in Spanish. But my mom was adamant that I should also learn to read in English. And she had to teach me at home because there was no English in the schools. And I hated English because it was so tedious and difficult. And the book she was trying to make me read was *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Have you ever heard of it? I hated that book - "the slough of despond" - What is a slough of despond; what is that stupid word; what does it mean? My first coming head-to-head with reading English was such a negative experience.

It wasn't until we moved from Panama that I learned to love reading English. I already loved Spanish and I read constantly, anything I could get my hands on: medical books, even. But when I was about 14, we moved to Trinidad; and it meant not only learning to read English but having to read it at the 10th grade level. I had to be able to

read English and to catch up with the other kids in order to sit the General Certificate of Education exams at the end of my Form 4, which was grade 12.

It was horrendous. I was terrified. But gradually, and only because we had done Latin, it clicked; I could read English! And once it clicked, they couldn't tear me away from the books. I read everything in sight; I became like a voracious caterpillar. I got to read all the popular English books: Tom Sawyer, The Bobsey Twins, Grimm Fairy Tales; I had read *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, but that is not very interesting for a 12 year old. Being introduced to all this wonderful Literature, being able to read it and understand it, comprehend it, was mind blowing.

(0:36:53.0)

BG: You had the quality and presence of mind to mark your own transition into English when it occurred; that's left you well suited to encourage the same transition for others; the effects were powerful enough to have remained with you as an ever present reality throughout your adult life.

MK: Yes, it's real; being able to read and comprehend English is so real; it's palpable. Charles Dickens: I must have read everything he wrote a million times over. And I guess because my first language was Spanish, which is so much more expressive, it was those older English writers that really clicked with me: Charles Dickens, Chaucer; I couldn't get enough.

So when my own kids came along, I started very early; not with *Pilgrim's Progress*, which I hate to this day; but with *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*; all

those exciting books with very intricate plots and interesting characters. And one of my girls is an actress: does Shakespeare off the top of her head; and the other one is a writer. So, I think that somehow I really passed that on to them. [Ms. Kelly's continued passion for language and reading came across so strongly in her voice as she told this story that it must be noted and should be heard.]

BG: I believe you did. Hearing that story about how you passed your love for reading down to your children highlights the fact that illiteracy too is passed down from one generation to the next.

MK: I had an experience that I think I must share with you along those lines: one of the parents, the same one who became a very good welder, chewed tobacco and she'd always have her snuff in her mouth. She came to me one day and said, "Ms. Kelly, I need to go to the Dentist." That was part of what we did; we helped supplement Medicare; that was part of my budget. So, I found a Dentist and sent her off. Before she left, I said, "I bet the Dentist is going to tell you that you need to stop with the snuff, because it must cause cancer." She went to the Dentist; she came back; she said, "Ms. Kelly you were wrong." I said, "I'm glad, what did he say?" she said, "The Dentist said I just need to brush my teeth." I said, "Well aren't you brushing your teeth in the morning?" She said, "Oh, I'm only brushing when I remember, Ms. Kelly." I said, "How often do you remember?" She said, "Once a month...." I said, "What? When do your kids brush their teeth?" She said, "Whenever I remember to tell them to brush." I said, "Now I know there was a dentist at your kid's school last week and all the kids got little toothbrushes and toothpaste. Have you done it at least every day for the last week?"

She said, “Oh, they squirted the toothpaste all over the place, so I took it away and threw it in the garbage.” I said, “Well, what did you do with the toothbrushes?” She said, “They’re there.” I said, “Have they brushed their teeth since you got them?” She said, “Ms. Kelly, I just told you I threw away the toothpaste; no, they haven’t brushed their teeth.” Then I thought to myself, “There it is; there will be another generation of kids who don’t have proper oral hygiene,” and even though the kids have had it stamped into their heads in school, this mother has not; it will not pass through that semipermeable membrane like osmosis; it’s dead in the water. We could spend a billion dollars; it’s still dead in the water.

BG: The parent is the trump card.

MK: Yes. And she went on to tell me, “My father never brushed his teeth and he had teeth when he died. When I asked, “How old was he when he died?” she said, “Fifty.” I said, “You *should* have all your teeth at fifty.”

I think when people talk about parental involvement that many times they’re talking only on a surface level. It’s one thing for the schools to promote something positive that they want or expect parents to do for their kids, but if those parents never had that same value instilled in them, how can they possibly pass it on? Now, let’s say the school had given the mother the toothpaste, handed it to her at the door; there might have been a little better chance to benefit the kids if they had tried to educate her about the value of brushing teeth with the hope that she would get it across successfully to her children. But if it’s not the mother’s priority, how could it be the children’s? Same thing with reading; if reading is not the parent’s priority; the kids are dead in the water. And

that's why I think adult basic education is so important. It's not just important; it's critical to our success.

And in their March 2010 Report, the Chamber of Commerce talked about the need to improve our literacy rates in terms of economic development; that is going to seep slowly, very slowly, as it trickles all the way down to those who need the basics. And you know, we might be having x number of graduates from colleges and universities, but I wonder how many of them read because they want to read; or are they reading because they have to, just giving a quick glance through things. And someone asked me since I've been here, "Do you read everything?' and I said, "Yes, I have to! If I don't, I can't understand what I'm doing." That just blows my mind: that the solution is so simple, really.

(0:45:04.0)

BG: That drive to understand, though, is a complicated one. And having it, as you obviously do, it's hard to imagine not having it.

MK: That's true.

BG: I think the drive to understand is a natural one for human beings and that it is squelched for some of us at points along our way. Because of our common endeavor, anything that goes to breaking that pattern, benefits all of us in the long run. Seeing the statistic that there are so many people who can't read right here in Nashville was just such a stunning thing that it pushed me to take some little part in the effort.

MK: Your choice of final paper has been so encouraging to me. It's like a springboard into what's out there.

BG: That's a happy by-product that I'm glad to hear. I'm hoping that I can continue to be involved in some way.

With my thanks, we left it there.