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Dr. Sandra Baxter

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Bringing community together

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John Corcoran writes new chapter

## NEWS IN BRIEF

**THE INSTITUTE IN  
PARENTS MAGAZINE**

"Reading to your toddler is one of the best ways to boost language skills," says **Andrea Grimaldi**, senior program officer for Early Childhood, who was quoted in the July *Parents* magazine story, *I love Storytime: The best way to read to your toddler*. Read the complete story on our website [www.nifl.gov](http://www.nifl.gov).

PHOTO CREDIT: SHANNON GREER



# Catalyst

A PUBLICATION FROM THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR LITERACY FALL 2008 ISSUE 2

## Shanahan on the National Early Literacy Panel Report: What's in Store

To help build a body of scientific evidence on young children's early literacy development and on home and family influences on that development, the Institute, in 2002, funded a group of nine nationally recognized experts, known as the National Early Literacy Panel (NELP). The panel reviewed the research on language, literacy, and communication in young children ages birth through five. As the panel's long-awaited report nears its release this fall, **Timothy Shanahan**, chairman of the NELP, took time out to talk about its findings, what parents and teachers can expect, and why the report will be worth the wait.

Shanahan, who served on the National Reading Panel, is also a member of the Institute's Advisory Board and a past president of the International Reading Association. The internationally recognized reading researcher with extensive experience working with children in Head Start, those with special needs, and in inner-city schools, is a professor of urban education at the University of Illinois at Chicago and director of its Center for Literacy.

*This interview was conducted, condensed, and edited by B. Denise Hawkins.*

### What did the National Early Literacy Panel or NELP set out to do?

The NELP reviewed research on beginning literacy ability. The National Reading Panel looked at traditional school-aged kids and then the issue became what about pre-schoolers and kindergartners? The NELP was charged with taking a good careful look at the early years as children develop literacy skills.



Timothy Shanahan, Chairman, National Early Literacy Panel

**Work on the NELP report has been underway for a number of years. For many, the findings have been much anticipated. What news is in store for those who have been eagerly awaiting results and updates about what the literature says about the effectiveness of instructional strategies, programs, and practices for young children?**

Those who have never done this kind of work don't realize the extent of the effort. The panel has spent a lot of time going through the research very carefully and systematically, looking at hundreds of studies that have been conducted over the years and trying to make sense of them and how they fit together. I think that the public and the field will find that the report will have been worth the wait.

While I don't think that there will be any big surprises in the findings, there may be a few small surprises along the way. The findings will



As we ease out of summer and lunge into fall, the Institute looks forward to ushering in several new products that have been in the works and much anticipated by those in the field. Key among them is the *National Early Literacy Panel* (NELP) report. In our cover story, NELP Chairman **Timothy Shanahan** provides a glimpse into the findings prepared by the incredibly dedicated nine-member expert group. They have spent the last several years scouring the literature on language, literacy, and communication in young children from 0 to age 5. The report's findings, when released this fall, promise to "fill" some of the research gaps and spur new research on children's literacy.

For those who have wondered about the status of *Bridges to Practice*, the Institute's research-based training program to support adults with learning disabilities, the past two years have focused on evaluation. In July, the Institute welcomed **Debi Basu**, a neuroscientist, as its new Program Officer for Education and Learning Disabilities.

This summer, our partnership with Mocha Moms, Inc. took the Institute, and its publications, to a Washington, DC barbershop for the launch of the Boys Booked on Barbershops program.

On September 8, the Institute will join with the nation and the world in marking **International Literacy Day**. The United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) reminds the international community of the status of literacy and adult learning globally. According to UNESCO, "literacy remains an elusive target: some 774 million adults lack minimum literacy skills; one in five adults is still not literate and two-thirds of them are women; 75 million children are out-of-school and many more attend irregularly or drop out."

**John Corcoran**, the Institute's first adult learner appointed to its Advisory Board, knows these troubling statistics well. Twenty-years ago, the nationally known literacy advocate, author, and high school teacher described himself as "illiterate." In our *Up Close* interview, Corcoran shares his plans for International Literacy Day; how he hopes to use his second book, *Bridge to Literacy: No Child or Adult Left Behind*, to help galvanize educators and the literacy community; and why there can be "no equal opportunity in the classroom or workplace without basic reading and writing skills."

**Sandra L. Baxter, Ed.D**  
*Director, National Institute for Literacy*

## Rep. Fattah to Host Congressional Black Caucus Forum on Literacy

*Baxter Joins Read, Lead, Succeed Panel*

WASHINGTON —

Institute Director Sandra L. Baxter will discuss the state of adult literacy in the U.S. and its impact on our workforce, especially in communities of color, during a forum sponsored by U.S. Rep. Chaka Fattah (D-PA).



Fattah will moderate the session titled "Read, Lead, Succeed" at the Washington Convention Center on Sept. 26 at 9 a.m. as a part of the Congressional Black Caucus' Annual Legislative Conference. When Dr. Baxter appeared in June 2007 before the House Committee on Education and Labor's Subcommittee on Higher Education, Lifelong Learning, and Competitiveness, her testimony was the only one that provided the Committee with information on adult literacy and implications for the national workforce.

John Corcoran, the first adult reading learner to serve on the Institute's presidentially appointed Board of Advisors in 1992, will join her on the panel. Corcoran is the author of the acclaimed book, *The Teacher Who Couldn't Read*. (Read more about John Corcoran on page 6 of *Catalyst*.) Other invited panelists include Verizon Foundation President Patrick Gaston; Payne Brown, vice president, Strategic Initiatives, Comcast Corporation; and ABC News Senior Correspondent, Pierre Thomas. In February 2008, Thomas consulted with the Institute when he examined adult literacy in America in a two-part TV special titled *Living in the Shadows: Illiteracy in America*. The segments aired on *World News with Charles Gibson*, and featured an interview with Baxter in part one of the series.

### CATALYST: CATA-LYST (KAT-a-list) WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Scientists know catalyst as "a substance that alters the speed of a chemical reaction and does not appear in the final product and undergoes no permanent changes; something that causes an important event to happen." What We Know: As an impartial, but important broker and catalyst, the National Institute for Literacy seeks solutions to improve literacy opportunities for adults, youth, and children across the lifespan. We have named this new publication *Catalyst* in the spirit of embracing our leadership, innovation, and energy in the field of literacy.

## The Institute Welcomes Debi Basu



**DEBI C. BASU,** the Institute's new Program Officer for Education and Learning Disabilities, joined the staff in July 2008.

Her work at the Institute focuses on the development and implementation of programs and research agendas on adolescent literacy and learning disabilities. Basu is a published neuroscientist with extensive research experience in brain imaging investigating language, development, and learning. She earned

her undergraduate degrees in science and biology from the University of Muenster, Germany, and from Iowa State University. Basu received her master's degree in neuroscience from Georgetown University in 2007.

Basu, a German native, also gained international training in adolescent dyslexia research at the University College in London, England, and completed an Harvard University fellowship that focused on functional magnetic resonance imaging or fMRI. Before joining the Institute, Basu spent time working and volunteering at an orphanage in East Africa.

### INSTITUTE TO HOST *RESEARCH TO PRACTICE* SESSIONS AT PROLITERACY CONFERENCE IN LITTLE ROCK

The Directors and Moderators of the National Institute for Literacy's LINC Regional Resource Centers, Resource Collections, and Discussion Lists will present a *Research to Practice* Institute during the ProLiteracy Worldwide conference in Little Rock, Ark. October 1–4. The U.S. programs division of ProLiteracy Worldwide is the largest adult literacy organization in the U.S., with more than 1,200 member groups nationwide.

The *Research to Practice* Institute, a series of pre-conference and conference sessions focused on research and the use of high-quality resources, will showcase the National Institute for Literacy's services and address a variety of topics including assessment, basic skills, professional development, program planning, reading, and workforce competitiveness. These interactive sessions are an opportunity for practitioners to learn more about LINC — Literacy Information and Communication System — projects, the benefits of using the Institute's online literacy discussion lists for professional development, and what the Regional Resource Centers have to offer. The Regional Resource Centers, which service the nation, are located in Boston, MA, Knoxville, Tenn., and in Oakland, Cal.

LINC is the backbone of the Institute's dissemination system, providing information on a variety of literacy relevant topics, issues, and resources. As national attention has increasingly focused on the quality of instruction and educational resources, the LINC emphasizes access to the highest-quality and up-to-date information, especially scientifically based research and resources. To learn more about LINC, the Regional Resource Centers, or how to join a Discussion List, visit [www.nifl.gov](http://www.nifl.gov). To attend the ProLiteracy Conference, visit [www.proliteracy.org/conference](http://www.proliteracy.org/conference) or call (315) 422-9121 ext. 352.

*To Our Readers,*  
*Catalyst, a quarterly newsletter from the Institute's Communications Office, contains news, information, and features about the programs and services of the National Institute for Literacy.*

#### **CATALYST**

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#### **About the National Institute for Literacy:**

The National Institute for Literacy is authorized and mandated under the No Child Left Behind Act to work on helping children, youth and adults to become successful readers. Under this authorization, the Institute's efforts include supporting scientifically based reading research and disseminating information on reading across the lifespan. In consultation with the Departments of Education, Labor, and Health and Human Services, the Institute serves as a national resource on literacy expertise, research, policy, and practice.

#### **Read Catalyst online at:**

[www.nifl.gov](http://www.nifl.gov)



PHOTO CREDIT: DEBI BASU/NIFL

## Literacy Begins at Home and in the Barbershop Institute, Mocha Moms Support Boys and Books

WASHINGTON — Sandra L. Baxter, director of the National Institute for Literacy, and Dee-Dee Jackson, national President of Mocha Moms, Inc., (second from left) greeted dozens of patrons, parents, and children as they filed into Campbell's Barbershop in Northeast Washington, DC on June 21 to launch the opening of a reading corner for boys.

In late 2007, the Institute and Mocha Moms, a national support group for stay-at-home mothers of color, teamed up to encourage the development of early literacy skills. That is why they are throwing their support behind the national Boys Booked on Barbershops (B-BOB) initiative. Mocha Moms, Inc. has been a B-BOB partner since 2006. Since then, more than 30 Mocha Moms chapters across the country have signed on to create reading nooks in local barbershops.

Mocha Moms enlisted shop owner, John Campbell, who agreed to house more than 200 children's books donated by Mocha Moms and packets of the Institute's literacy publications for parents. Since its start in 2004, Boys B-BOB reading nooks have debuted in more than 100 barbershops across the country, from Florida to Illinois. The nooks will feature books by and about African Americans, with an emphasis on topics that interest the barbershop patrons.

"The barbershops offer a fun, safe, and familiar environment for children to read and be read to by caring adults as they wait their turn or sit in the barber's chair," says Jackson.

"We are very excited to be an integral part of this out-of-the box concept."

### FIND BOOKS AT CAMPBELL'S

Since 1972, Campbell's has sat alone at the end of Dix Street, along the rough and tumble northeast corridor. The dusty pale green walls of the shop are crammed with faded photos of the famous and those familiar in the neighborhood. There are yellowing funeral programs, and relics of a by-gone day. John Campbell's station in the back of the tiny shop, is crammed with periodicals, a vintage cash register, jars of Lucky Tiger balm, and tall glass bottles filled with lime green Jeris Hair Tonic.

PHOTO CREDIT: DEBI BASU/NIFL



Never Too Early to Start Reading: Ayinde Utsey, 2, made his own book selection.

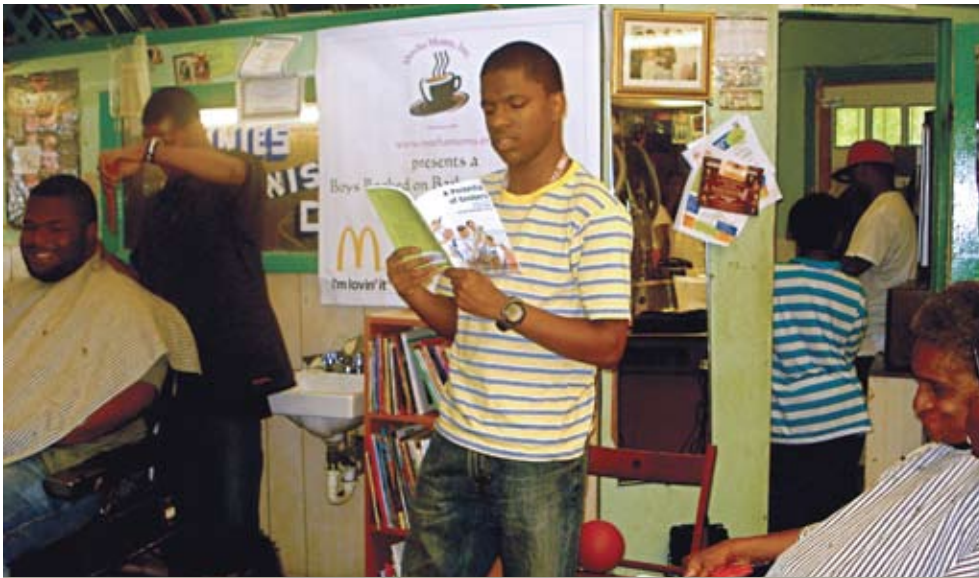
Campbell's, where men can still find a \$5.00 haircut and a familiar place to park their cares or just share the news of the day, is also where the Institute and Mocha Moms hope little boys and their fathers will find time to share a book and build reading skills.

When Mocha Moms tapped Campbell to be a part of its first Boys Booked on Barbershop launch in the Mid-Atlantic region, he did what came naturally — said yes.

"What I try to do is my best to show that there are ways to help others. For Campbell, that means, "giving back to the community."

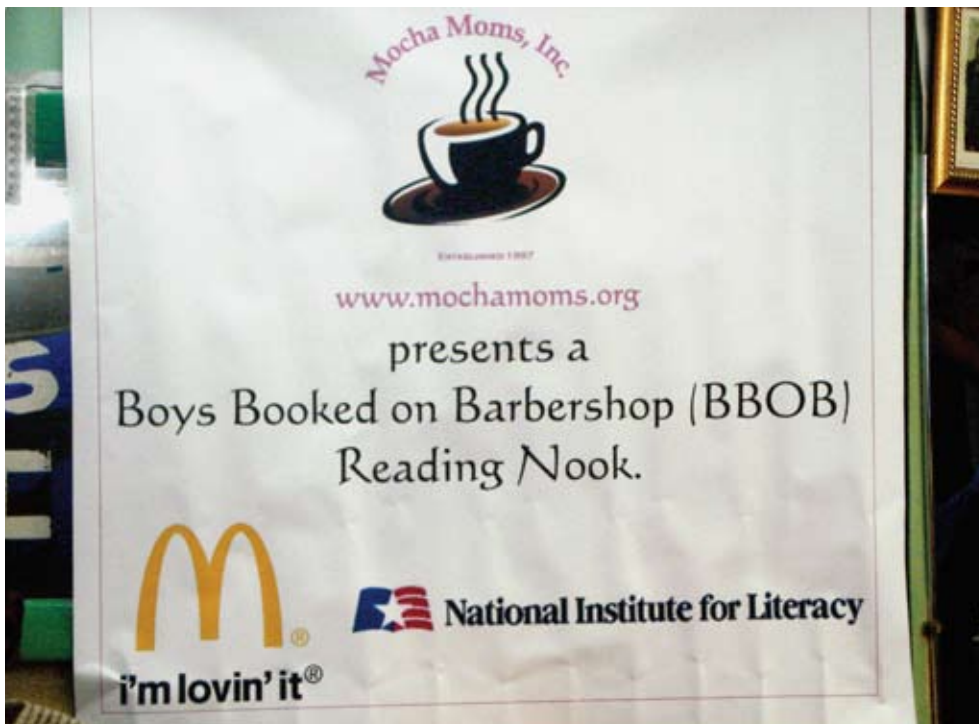
### FROM THE READING CORNER

With the sound of clippers humming in the background, young readers picked books from the new oak bookshelf at Campbell's and read aloud to attentive adults scattered around the shop. As older youngsters read aloud, two-year-old Ayinde Utsey, a son of Mocha Mom, Monica Utsey, picked out his own book from the reading nook, proving that it is never too early to start reading and enjoying books. ■



At 17, Alexander Cole is already an award-winning writer (center). Cole was one of the young people who demonstrated their reading skills and played instruments when the National Institute for Literacy and Mocha Moms, Inc. opened a reading corner on June 21, at Campbell's Barbershop in Northeast Washington, DC as a part of the Boys Booked on Barbershops national initiative.

PHOTO CREDIT: DEBI BASU/NIFL



The Boys Booked on Barbershop sign hangs over the new reading nook for children and adults in John Campbell's Northeast, Washington, DC barbershop. Adult patrons can take home free Institute publications and children can read and share books while they wait in the shop.

PHOTO CREDIT: DEBI BASU/NIFL

## ADVANCING HEALTH LITERACY AS CLOSE AS YOUR COMPUTER

*Practitioners to Discuss Health Literacy Innovations, Partnerships During September Webcast*

October is Health Literacy Month. Join the Institute as it kicks off the observance with a live webcast on **Tuesday, September 16 at 1 p.m. EST.**

**Susan R. Levy** of the University of Illinois at Chicago, **Andrew Pleasant** of Rutgers University, Ian Bennett of the University of Pennsylvania, and others will help advance the discussion on health literacy as they present on topics including innovations in health literacy partnerships and promising instructional approaches for supporting adult learners. Institute Director **Sandra L. Baxter**, will moderate the forum. Check the Institute's website, [www.nifl.gov](http://www.nifl.gov), for more information on presenters and how you can participate in the webcast.

## COMING SOON: NEW RESEARCH-BASED HEALTH LITERACY CURRICULUM FOR BEGINNING ADULT LEARNERS

Adult literacy instructors will soon have access to a new research-based health literacy curriculum and instructor manual to initially support beginning-level native and non-native English speakers. Susan R. Levy, Professor Emerita and Fellow at the University of Illinois at Chicago's Institute for Health Research and Policy, who conducted the research, will discuss the study during the Institute's September 16 Health Literacy Webcast.

The Institute's Regional Resource Center in Oakland, Calif., developed the instructor manual and curriculum based on Levy's five-year research. Professional development training on the curriculum will be offered this fall. The National Institutes of Health and the U.S. Department of Education also supported the study.

## From Non-Reader to Acclaimed Author, John Corcoran Keeps Turning Pages

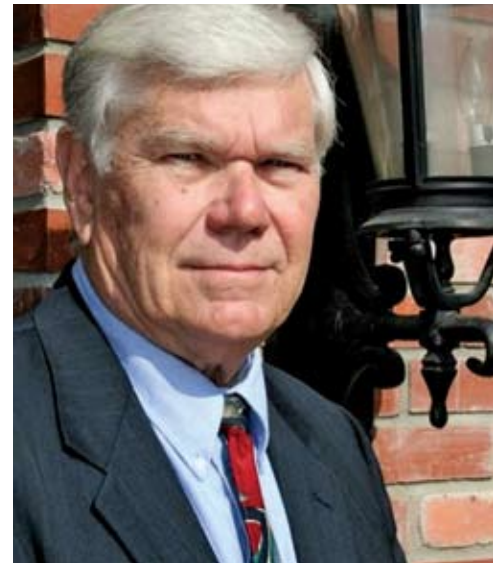
*John Corcoran, 70, is a national literacy advocate. Two U.S. presidents tapped him to serve on the National Institute for Literacy's Advisory Board. And he's written two books. But 22 years ago, Corcoran lived a life of secrecy and shame. He was "illiterate."*

**H**e still remembers the constant childhood prayer he whispered at night — “please God, tomorrow when it's my turn to read, please let me read,” and being placed in the “dumb row” in school.

“I couldn't read, I couldn't write a sentence. I was illiterate,” said Corcoran who learned to read at age 48 with the help of a volunteer literacy tutor.

Growing up, Corcoran managed to bounce from grade to grade without knowing

how to read, cheating and maneuvering his way all the way to college. In 1961, he completed college while still not being able to read. Surprisingly, that didn't stop Corcoran from becoming a high school teacher, a job he held in the Oceanside School District for nearly two decades with the help of dedicated teaching assistants and by creating an oral and visual classroom environment. Corcoran never used the written word in his classroom, he recalls in his 1994 book, *The Teacher Who*



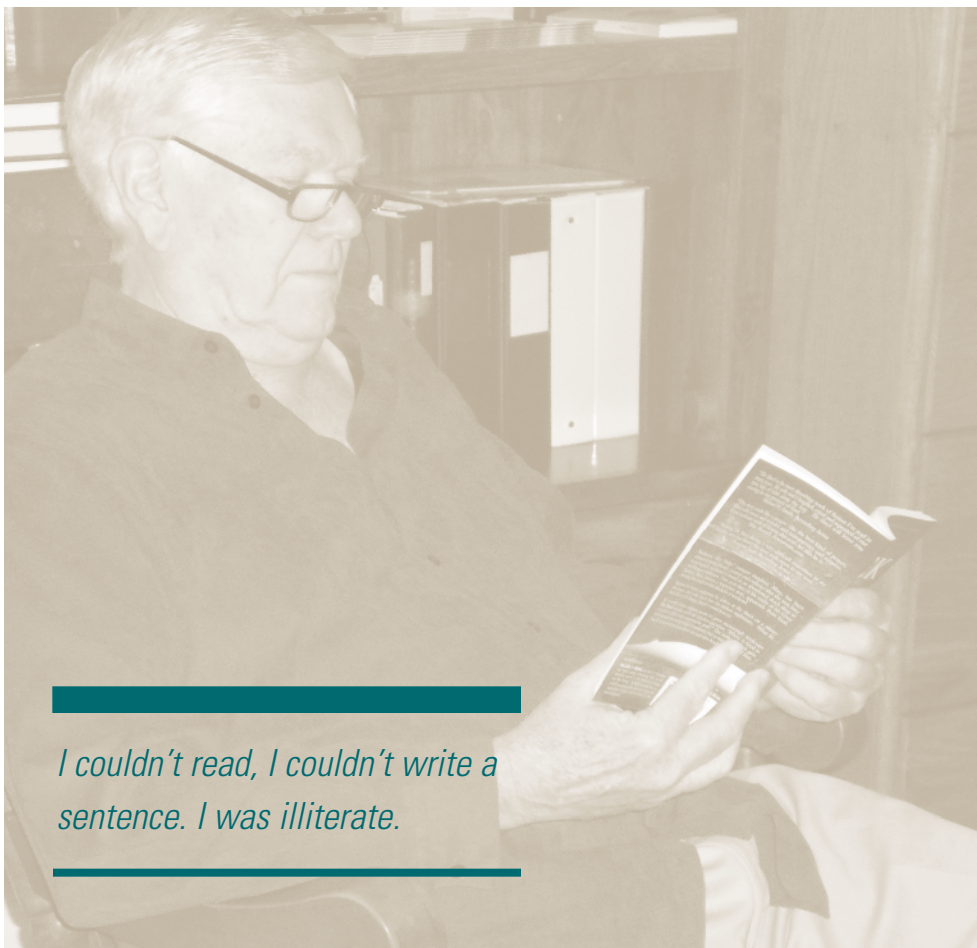
*Couldn't Read.* The book was re-released on September 2. His new book, *Bridge to Literacy: No Child or Adult Left Behind*, is due out in October.

*This interview was conducted, condensed, and edited by B. Denise Hawkins.*

**Q: In your first highly acclaimed book, *The Teacher Who Couldn't Read*, you unveiled an intensely personal account of John Corcoran the child who was not taught how to read and of John Corcoran the adult who lived with the shame of “his illiteracy.” But in your new book, *Bridge to Literacy*, you issue what you describe as a call to action... “to gather all the tribes within literacy.” Can you talk about the need for such a call and who should gather with you on the bridge to literacy?**

**Corcoran:** About 25 percent of the population learns to read like birds learn to fly. They walk by the library and they just get it. At the opposite end of the spectrum, 25-30 percent of the population has difficulty processing the language.

Living life to the fullest in America today includes mastering reading and writing skills. Reading makes you smarter. There is no equal opportunity in the classroom or workplace without basic reading and writing skills. The dominant language of the classroom and the workplace is the written word. Many parents, teachers, educators, and policymakers are



*I couldn't read, I couldn't write a sentence. I was illiterate.*

already on the bridge to literacy. However, *all* literate people need to share their precious gift of literacy. They need to understand the problem and be proactive in solving the problems. Illiteracy affects us all. Being able to read and write leads to healthier, more cohesive families, confidence, higher learning, a better workplace, and a stronger economy.

Already on the bridge are many passionate and committed people, yet there is room for more.

**Q: There is stigma associated with the term “illiterate” and the National Institute for Literacy discourages its use to describe and define those who can’t read or who have below average reading, writing, and oral skills. You use the term often and casually to describe yourself and others. What meaning does the term hold for you?**

Corcoran: I consciously chose that word. When I first learned to read and shared my story, people kept asking me if I was learning disabled and they asked me if I was dyslexic? All I knew from my own perception was that I couldn’t read. I still use that language. I do think that (illiterate) is the most direct language. It is harsh, but I don’t want anybody taking harshness out of it. It means you can’t read. People would ask me “what level do you read at?” I am a college graduate. It doesn’t matter if I read at the third grade level or the fourth grade level. I couldn’t read, I couldn’t write a sentence. I couldn’t write a paragraph. I was illiterate.

But here I am, someone who’s been frightened by words all his life. Now I’m choosing words that are my words.

I would have to say I was learning disabled, but I could build a house, I could do a lot of things, so why would you think I was disabled? I just had a difficult time learning to read. It took me so long to read because I never had the proper instruction and that was really the problem. There never was anything really wrong with my brain.

I never really identified with any of that [being learning disabled] and I have a little bit of trouble with the term “disabled.”

“Dis” literally means “not” — not able. Why would I want a teacher that’s supposed to impart skills to...use the word “not able” to describe their student? I’d rather use the word “deficiency.” A deficiency is something that can be taken care of.

**Q: What are you reading now?**

Corcoran: *Quiet Strength* by Tony Dungy; *The Purpose Driven Life* by Rick Warren; and *Ishi in Two Worlds: a Biography of the Last Wild Indian in North America* by Theodora Kroeber.

I love to read for information. I read history, periodicals, short essays, and “how-to” books. I read English textbooks for building English skills because when I first learned to read, I couldn’t write a sentence or a paragraph so I’ve had to start from the ground up. Every now and then, I sit down and read the thesaurus.

**Q: What challenges, if any, do you still face with reading and writing? Although you can now read, do you still consider yourself an adult learner?**

Corcoran: I feel comfortable as a reader because I can read anything I need to, now. With writing, however, it’s a long production because I’m still learning grammar. My spelling has greatly improved. I keep an electronic dictionary with me all the time.

In the first stage of my reading, I referred to myself as a “new reader.” Then I became a “developing literate” and after 10 years I started thinking of myself as a literate person who could read independently, probably at the college level. I often refer to non-readers as “we” because I still identify with the culture and experience of not being able to read. My wife has to remind me that I’m literate now.

I consider myself a lifelong learner. Even as an adult, I’ve always felt like we all have something to learn.

**Q: What documents, papers, or books have you heard about and been intrigued by that you want to read but can’t because of their level of complexity?**

Corcoran: History intrigues me. I read high school-level textbooks to get the

simpler version. I also like to watch historical documentaries. *The Republic* by Plato is a book I recall whose density and complexity ended up not being worth my energy. When reading the *Bible*, the challenge there is not so much the concepts, but the proper names.

I have read the Bill of Rights and I understand those concepts. Since learning to read, I have an interest in law and a new respect for it. I also have an aptitude for reading and comprehending legal documents, which is rooted in my business experience.

**Q: You were the first adult learner to serve on the National Institute for Literacy’s Advisory Board in 1992. Did you ever dream that you would one day be tapped by two presidents (George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton) to help influence the nation’s literacy agenda?**

Corcoran: It was an honor to be appointed by a president and to serve under two presidents. I never imagined in my wildest dreams that I would share my embarrassing shameful secret with anyone other than my wife, especially not with the nation. A secret I had guarded for over four decades became a tool to influence our nation’s literacy agenda.

**Q: Despite the personal and professional strides you have made in the fields of education, literacy, and business, do you think that you will long be known as the teacher who couldn’t read? What is the teacher who *can* read doing today?**

Corcoran: I have come to terms with the embarrassing and shameful public title of “the teacher who couldn’t read” because it is an attention-getter that has allowed me the opportunity to share my story and issue a call to action. Although the headline of my experience is *The Teacher who Couldn’t Read*, it is not the story. I get to tell the story which is “America can’t read.” I am no longer the teacher who can’t read, I am the teacher who can read. I am not a teacher in the classroom anymore. I am a teacher on the bridge.

*Continued on page 8*

*Corcoran Continued from Page 6*

The John Corcoran Foundation's mission is to facilitate the prevention and eradication of illiteracy in children and adults across America. We are currently launching a *Community Read Program* to create awareness. To date; we have tutored over 2,000 students and trained over 300 tutors. We are very busy!

**Q: The African proverb says: "It takes a village to raise a child." Who and what will it take to ensure that all children can read by the time they reach the critical third-grade threshold?**

**Corcoran:** Parents are a child's first and most important teacher. Some parents read to their children and prepare them before they go to school. Too many other parents cannot read and thus cannot prepare their children for school. In America, we require that all children attend school for sixteen years and yet we must accept children where they are.

It is the responsibility of schools and teachers to impart the values and skills of literacy to all students. Forty million dollars worth of research in the last decade has told us how to teach little boys and girls like me to read. The challenge is to close the gap between what we know to be true and what we are actually doing.

**Q: How do we do that?**

**Corcoran:** What is needed is diagnostic testing for all students throughout their education and proper instruction by properly trained teachers. A properly trained teacher comes from an adequate university that offers research-based training and instruction.

**Q: In *Bridge to Literacy*, you cite Reading First as the nation's most successful early reading initiative. Now, as the prospect of the demise of Reading First looms, what do you foresee as a new or continued role for the federal government in improving reading instruction?**

**Corcoran:** Because of the controversial and emotionally charged No Child Left

Behind Act (NCLB), the critical component in the legislation, Reading First, looks like it's going to be an innocent victim of a head-on collision.

We can't simply blame our schools and teachers and we can't simply blame NCLB for America's literacy epidemic and our frustration with school failure.

Illiteracy crosses the boundaries of political parties. We have the blueprint to teach children to read, which includes properly trained teachers, accountability, and remedial instruction. The only cure for illiteracy is literacy. I am hopeful that the new administration will show courage and leadership. It is the role of the federal government to improve reading instruction and ensure accountability for the sake of our children.

**Q: As the U.S. joins countries around the world in observing International Literacy Day on September 8, we know that there are little boys and girls who wake up every morning like you once did, wishing that they knew how to read. We know that there are courageous adult learners who are on the path to literacy but who ask themselves, the question you once asked yourself, "why did it take me so long to learn how to read?"**

**What will you be doing to mark International Literacy Day and how will you remember those boys and girls and men and women who are struggling?**

**Corcoran:** I will be celebrating International Literacy Day in Santa Fe at the New Mexico Coalition for Literacy, which includes a Proclamation from the governor and a press conference in the Capital Rotunda. I will remember and honor those boys and girls and men and women by continuing to remind America that even with all of our noble efforts, there is still a massive education gap and the epidemic of illiteracy raging on. In America today, illiteracy is a form of child neglect and child abuse. I was

once that little boy and that ashamed adult. My message is that we can all learn to read with proper instruction and it is never too late to learn. Today, it is as important to teach an adult to read as it is to teach a child to read.

**Q: Are you hopeful that the actions you and others concerned about literacy and learning are taking will result in the realization of a new vision of literacy in America?**

**Corcoran:** I am hopeful because we are a country that believes in equal opportunity. However, there is no equal opportunity without basic reading and writing skills. The demand for literacy skills is especially increasing in today's technological economy. In the last decade the research tells us that

*There is no equal opportunity in the classroom or workplace without basic reading and writing skills.*

everyone can learn to read and describes the proper way to teach someone. The research has validated my own personal experience and I have met thousands of men and women from every walk of life who are ardent advocates for a literate America.

**Q: What advice do you give to children and youth struggling with reading and adult learners who cannot read?**

**Corcoran:** Reading and writing are skills that we can all learn. It is hard work for some of us to learn how to read and it takes time. We're not dumb. Never give up on yourself. It's not too late. I learned when I was 48! I can tell the kids "don't give up on yourself," but it is equally important to tell the adult in the room, "not to give up on the child." ■



# Two-Year Bridges to Practice Evaluation Nears Completion

## Examination of LD Research, State Data Will Inform 2009 Training Materials

The National Institute for Literacy (Institute), in fall 2006, commissioned an evaluation of *Bridges to Practice*, its well-known program and series of materials. The program's signature guidebooks were designed to train adult educators, screen, teach, and provide other services that improve education and employment outcomes for learning disabled adults.

"The evaluation process is nearly completed," said Lynn Reddy, the Institute's deputy director, adding, "The Institute set out to determine what was working well in Bridges and what could be changed and improved."

The evaluators interviewed Bridges master trainers, observed the training of three cohorts of new Bridges trainers, and examined Bridges guidebooks. This evaluation data, plus state-level data still to be collected, will inform the recommendations to the Institute.

"The evaluation also included a very thorough examination of the research on adults with learning disabilities that will help us update the Bridges training materials," Reddy said.

The training guides, including a trainer's manual, were developed through a grant from the Institute and were based on research with adults and youth with learning disabilities conducted in the 1990s by the University of Kansas. The research underlying the existing guidebooks and training content is more than 15 years old, and the Institute felt it was critical to review the research literature again. Five reviewers with expertise in learning disabilities accommodations, teaching methods, English language learners, and transition, are in the final stages of completing the Bridges review. The literature review will be published and distributed widely in the next several

months. Developing new materials, the final activity in the Bridges evaluation, will begin once the literature review is completed.

In August, the Institute offered two interim training sessions for small groups of practitioners in Virginia and Georgia. These three-day sessions covered a portion of the content that will be offered in the new Bridges training. They included definition of LD, self-determination, legal issues, and accommodations. They also provided opportunities to learn and practice training techniques. These interim trainings also provided the Institute with valuable feedback needed to inform and make further revisions, if needed, before launching the 2009 training materials.

Staff members at the Institute's LINC'S Regional Resource Center at the University of Tennessee managed the interim



training sessions and "have done a terrific job," Reddy said. LINC'S, which stands for the Literacy Information and Communication System, is the Institute's Internet-based network of literary partners and resources. Tennessee is one of three Regional Resources Centers that serve the nation. When the 2009 training is launched, the Regional Resource Centers will take on new responsibilities as the primary liaison between the states and the Institute concerning Bridges.

Said Reddy: "The Centers' strong relationships with the states in their regions will enable the Institute to offer LD training in a timely, efficient manner that best responds to states' needs." ■

## The Science of Learning Disabilities

Compiled by **Debi Basu**, program officer for Education and Learning Disabilities

### Q: What causes Learning Disabilities?

A: A learning disability is a neurological disorder (in very simple terms, it results from an individual's brain being "wired" differently). Scientific evidence from genetic studies and brain research clearly demonstrates the neurobiological basis of learning disabilities, although the exact causes of such abnormalities are still not well understood.

### Q: Do genetics play a factor in Learning Disabilities?

A: Learning disabilities are now thought to have a genetic basis. They often run in families, as observed in twin and sibling studies and family pedigree analyses. These studies have shown that a family history of learning disabilities significantly increases the probability of an individual having a learning disability. Researchers are still trying to understand how exactly such genes get passed on.

Sources for this compilation include:

Learning Disabilities Association of America:  
<http://www.ldanatl.org>

"Neurobiological Basis of Learning Disabilities,"  
C. Fiedorowicz et al. (1999)

"Genetic and Neurobiological Bases of Language and Reading Disabilities," The Connection between language and Reading Disabilities. Catts and Kamhi (Eds.), Lawrence Erlbaum (2005) ■

*Shanahan Continued from Page 1*

give folks a higher level of certainty than they have had in the past and provide guidance on the actions that they can take to improve kids' early literacy and language development.

**Without tipping your hand too much, can you talk about what you learned from doing this research and perhaps some unexpected things this study has yielded?**

One of the things studies like this uncover are gaps. There are a lot of questions that practitioners and parents have that can't be answered with the existing research. One of the things that this study has done is identified for the research community open questions where we don't have sufficient knowledge. What we have found will guide both government research priorities and also individual choices of researchers into areas where we need answers.

**What is in store for parents and classroom teachers looking forward to the report's findings?**

Both for parents and for people who teach young children, this [NELP report] is really going to give them a useful outline of the types of things that need to be taught; the things that have worked effectively in the past. I don't know if it will make their work any easier, but it will make it more effective by allowing them to focus on what really matters in early development.

**There are a lot of questions that practitioners and parents have that can't be answered with the existing research.**

**How does your experience and work on the NELP compare to your work on the National Reading Panel?**

As a National Reading panelist, I was immersed in reviewing the research on particular questions. One of the things that you have to do when multiple research questions are being pursued is make sure that they are all getting adequate answers and the same level of attention.

**Who are the panelists serving with you on the NELP? What types of expertise do they represent?**

The individuals on this panel are professors; they include those who have taught pre-school and have done research on pre-school literacy. They are physicians, curriculum designers, and professional development experts. They really have a pretty wide set of experiences in this area and many of them are parents and grandparents. They bring a lot of expertise, especially in the early years of kids' learning.



**How many research questions did the NELP panel pursue? What were they?**

The panel looked at four major questions. The first was what counts as early literacy development? When the National Reading Panel looked at school-aged kids, it didn't want to get bogged down in the definitions and disagreements. It accepted any measures of reading and writing that were valid and that the public could look at and say, "Yes, that's about reading and writing."

The NELP panel had a problem. Young children — three and four year olds — don't read and write. The question becomes, how



**Young children — three and four year olds — don't read and write. The question becomes, how do you know if a program or intervention is having a positive effect if you can't measure it using reading and writing measures?**

do you know if a program or intervention is having a positive effect if you can't measure it using reading and writing measures? The panel set out to find what early measures of literacy and language were really good predictors of success in reading and writing.

### **Give us a glimpse into how the NELP panel pursued answers to this question?**

We had to review hundreds of studies on that one question alone to identify those measures and variables that were going to matter. Once we identified those, panelists found all of the studies that had been published where somebody tried to improve young kid's literacy development — every intervention, every program. Because there were fewer studies on young children, it was possible to say let's look at all experimental studies where somebody tried to improve kids' literacy. The panel searched and found a couple hundred articles that fit into various categories. They then used those studies to determine, generally, what programs and efforts improve kids' early literacy.

Once they knew what programs and interventions were actually effective, they then were able to ask questions about under what circumstances and context were they effective? Are there particular child characteristics that make a difference in whether things work or not? They looked at what constitutes literacy for young children and asked what can we do to improve literacy measures in those early years?

These are some interesting questions that I think pre-school teachers and parents are going to be interested in the answers to.

### **I understand that the NELP report and its findings will be adapted and shared with the business sector and others outside of the literacy and education communities.**

If you look at the impact of literacy in society, it is either enabling or undermining people's ability to participate in the workplace effectively. It's impacting people's ability to take care of their health needs; it has an influence on whether people are able to stay out of the criminal justice system, and it dictates people's engagement in civic life.

We are starting to get a picture of what kinds of things need to be done in society to ensure that we get to higher levels of literacy. Those things have to be not only of interest to a parent, but they need to be of interest to everybody who has a stake in this society. Business leaders want to make a profit and a workforce who can do the things that they need them to do. They want to be able to give value added in their products and services, but that's only going to happen if we have a sufficiently literate society.


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