

With Literacy and Justice for All

--Guest Column by Jill A. Oglesby, Director of Valencia County Literacy Council
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Georgia Learned to Love Books

From preschool, Georgia's journey in school was not an easy one. When Georgia was four, she was given her first IQ test. Georgia says, "I regarded this as both amusing and insulting." So, she says, "I told the other kids to be uncooperative and say surprising things to their stupid questions."

After this, Georgia was labeled a behavior problem. "The teachers shook their heads and said to my mother 'We just don't know what we're going to do with Georgia!' My mother concurred and spanked me good and hard."

When she started first grade, things didn't get any easier. She says of her first school, "Emerson seemed to be governed by a lot of rules and punishments for breaking them. I got spanked with a ping-pong paddle for going to the bathroom during recess, which wasn't allowed." She goes on to say, "Mrs. Stapelton paddled me publicly and encouraged the other children to enjoy the spectacle. When I cried, she ridiculed me, calling me 'cry baby' and getting the other children to chime in."

Things went badly with Georgia's reading, too. Georgia says Mrs. Stapelton graded reading by behavioral standards. "If you misbehaved," Georgia says, "she put you back into a lower reading group in order to humiliate you and let the other kids know you were bad and stupid."

Books didn't interest Georgia. "The books were full of good little children who always did what they were told," she says. "Reading about them seemed boring and dumb. 'See Spot run.' Who cares? I'd rather be bad. My first report card had all F's on it. I got spanked again. School was Hell."

When she was in fifth grade, the school gave IQ tests. "I wanted to get out of there and go play, so I just went down the sheet and checked all the answers randomly." When the teacher called Georgia's mother to tell her Georgia was severely retarded, Georgia's mother said Georgia was faking it and need to be spanked again.

Georgia says after that her teacher, Mrs. Limebaugh, "took another look at me. She had been a 'tomboy' herself, and had spent her childhood playing wild Indian in the swamps of Florida with her brothers and their pet raccoon."

Mrs. Limebaugh began reading books to the class every day. "Not the icky dumb Dick and Jane junk all the other teachers made us read," Georgia says, "but a book about a pair of sisters during World War II who smuggled English pilots out of Paris with the underground. All of a sudden, I really wanted to read. If you could read stories like these, maybe reading wasn't such a drag after all." Eventually, Georgia says, "It got so all I wanted to do was read." At the end of the year, Mrs. Limebaugh gave another IQ test. "I tested at the 11th grade level in reading," Georgia says.

"Years later, after going back to UNM in my forties to finally get my college degree and on to get a Master's Degree in Counseling," Georgia says, "I was searching for a Practicum. My old neighborhood where Emerson was now known as 'The War Zone' because of the prevalence of crime and violence. They asked me to go back to Emerson."

Georgia's feelings about going back are what many Students feel when first coming for help to Valencia County Literacy Council (VCLC). "Just walking through the halls was frightening for me," she says. "I remembered the pain and humiliation I had suffered there." But the old principal had been replaced by someone warm and kind.

"I went on to use my art and counseling skills to work with some really wonderful and amazing children," she says. Now Georgia is using these same skills to work with a group of developmentally disabled Students here

at VCLC as a Volunteer Tutor. Her own bad experiences in school give her an inside understanding of what it's like to struggle with reading.

Want to help someone discover the joy of reading yourself? We have free New Tutor Training May 30 and June 27 with orientations May 19 and May 20. Call Susan Howard today at 925-8935 for more information.