

With Literacy and Justice for All

--Guest Column by Jill A. Oglesby, Director of Valencia County Literacy Council
((505) 925-8926, joglesby@valencialiteracy.org, www.valencialiteracy.org)



What Literacy Means to Me

Mom could have been another statistic. She wasn't. She was the first in her immediate family to complete middle school and the first to go to college.

My grandparents had just a 4th and 7th grade education. My grandfather, George Shirley, was taken out of school after the 4th grade by foster parents. He was an orphan, and his mother had died from complications from his birth. His father, William Shirley, had been a red-headed, Irish-American cowboy in West Texas who died after being shot in a feud.

My grandmother, Willie, was put to work in a cotton mill after the 7th grade so the family could survive. She and her sister, Lucille, changed bobbins on the huge bobbin threading machine at the mill. One of my favorite stories is of how my grandparents met.

One day, my grandmother's sister dared her to whistle at the new foreman, the one

with the Irish twinkle in his eye. So, high up in a loft, my grandmother whistled at my grandfather and hid. Later, my grandfather walked up to the sisters in the yard below.

"Who whistled at me, Lucille?" he asked.

"Willie," Lucille said, pointing at my grandmother, who turned beet red.

George and Willie Shirley, without a lot of education, provided Mom with the early background she needed to succeed in school. For one thing, importantly, my grandmother read to Mom regularly. Mom says once, when she was very sick, her mother read her *Anne of Green Gables* out loud from start to finish. In this way, Mom began to imagine worlds beyond her own.

My grandparents also did something else crucial for young children's reading success. They told stories, like the time my great grandfather, William Shirley, ran away and was raised by the Choctaw. When he came home as a teenager, his red hair flowed way down his back like a great red river. They taught Mom that stories have beginnings, middles, and ends. They taught her description and metaphor. They made up rhymes and made plays on words from which Mom learned the rhythms and sounds of language. My mother's house was a hub of verbal activity.

Today, I work with people like my grandparents--people who for one reason or another didn't complete school. Sometimes, it's because they had an undiagnosed learning disability. Sometimes, it's because of disruption in their lives, or from not having been read to or helped with pre-reading at home. Sometimes, they've immigrated, as my great, great grandparents emigrated from Ireland, and they need to learn the language of their new country. Whatever the reason, the Valencia County Literacy Council (VCLC) provides a leg up. My grandparents had hard lives economically, and

they had no programs to help them go back to school. VCLC intervenes, providing a way forward for hundreds of Valencia County residents.

And, we need volunteers. We have a New Tutor Training coming up January 12 and 19 at UNM-Valencia, and if you were, like me, one of those kids under the covers after lights out with a flashlight reading Nancy Drew or some other good book, we need you. Simply call Susan Howard at 925-8935 to register (showard@valencialiteracy.org). Susan is very caring and loves to meet new students, so if you know anyone who might need our services, just give Susan a call.

Or, if you like kids, consider being a BOOK Reader, like Marj Conner. Marj reads to low-income children in First Choice in Belen every Monday, and we have slots available at local WIC Clinics and Presbyterian Healthcare as well. VCLC also provides physicians with new books to give out to families, and we need donations of lightly used or new books. The wonderful TC Storey coordinates BOOK Readers, and you can reach her at 565-0433 (tcstorey@valencialiteracy.org).

Finally, we also need financial donations, which can be sent to Valencia County Literacy Council, 280 La Entrada, Los Lunas, NM 87031. VCLC has been here for 20 years now (Pam Etre Perez and Dolores Padilla founded VCLC in 1987), and we'd like to thank everyone in Valencia County for making VCLC possible.