

A Worldwide Movement

--by Jill A. Oglesby, Director
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Dr. Bob Laubach, (unknown person), Susan Howard, Jill Oglesby,
Ruth J. Colvin, and Cynthia Mabe (from Dr. Bob's camera).

It's a simple idea. It isn't earth-shattering. It doesn't make a lot of noise. But, it has the power to change the world.

It can transform lives and revitalize communities. It's audacious, and revolutionary, and it speaks to our deepest values.

What is it? It's the idea that someone who knows how to read can teach someone else to read. In the U.S., Cora Wilson Stewart was a pioneer of the idea. Born in 1875 in the mountains of Kentucky, Stewart grew up among feuds. She believed education could help end violence. In 1911, as Superintendent of the Rowan County Schools, she opened "Moonlight Schools" for adults to learn to read. She expected 150 at the first meeting, and 1200 people showed up. Tutors volunteered on moonlit nights when adults could find their way in the dark (no streetlights there).

Then, in 1935 in the Philippines, Dr. Frank Laubach started the "Each One Teach One" literacy program to help the Maranao people, among whom he was a missionary. In 1955, this became Laubach Literacy. Dr. Bob Laubach, his son, joined him in his literacy work in 1946, visiting over 105 countries in the next 55 years. Dr. Bob gave me important career advice last

November at the national conference: “Always bring an extra battery for your camera,” Dr. Bob said, smiling, after mine died as we tried to take a picture with him and Ruth Colvin.

Ruth J. Colvin founded Literacy Volunteers of America (LVA) in 1962. Colvin was also interested in mission work in “third world” countries when she discovered to her shock that 11,000 people in her town of Syracuse, New York could not read. Now 92, having worked in over 40 countries, Colvin was telling me excitedly about her recent trips to Haiti and Central America. In 2006, Colvin received the Presidential Medal of Freedom

In 2002, Laubach Literacy and LVA merged to become ProLiteracy Worldwide (www.proliteracy.org), and I was excited! Now we had the best of both. These are a few of the principles upon which ProLiteracy Worldwide's work is founded:

- All people are endowed with innate human dignity and the potential to learn and change.
- Literacy programs should reflect the needs and priorities of local learners.
- Literacy instruction is a crucial component of effective community development programs.

When I think of community development, I think of the RailRunner station and how I love driving on fresh asphalt. Literacy, though, is something we can't see. According to the National Adult Literacy Survey of 1992, 20% of adults in Valencia County would have trouble helping their 3rd grader with homework, and another 24.2% speak no or only very limited English. (Around the world, there are about 1 billion non-literate adults, or 26% of the world's population.) We can feel the effects of low literacy levels just as we feel potholes in a road. And, we can feel it when someone gets help. When someone walks up to the RailRunner station and can read the schedule for the first time, that person's new self esteem radiates around him or her to the whole community.

But, do we know that Volunteer Tutoring works? Don't you have to be a Reading Specialist or trained English teacher? Study after study shows that adults who receive Volunteer Literacy Tutoring get better jobs, have lower health care costs, reduce their dependence on “welfare,” and return less often to prison (if they've been incarcerated) in addition to raising reading levels. Their children also do decidedly better in school as the parent's educational level rises.

Literacy makes good economic sense. One study found that for every dollar invested in Literacy, \$33 was returned to the local community in the form of higher wages, higher tax revenues, lower health care costs, lower criminal justice costs, etc. (A.T. Kearney 1999).

Literacy volunteers help fight against poverty and help neighbors become better workers, community members, and parents. When neighbors reach out to help neighbors, magic happens

So, how can you become a part of it all? Valencia County Literacy Council's next New Tutor Training is Sept. 13 and 20 at the UNM-Valencia Campus. It is free, and we'll feed you breakfast and lunch. After two Saturdays, you'll feel confident as a Tutor. Call Susan Howard at 925-8935 to register today. Connect yourself to both local community and the wider world through Literacy—you'll be glad you did!