

Word work rewarding for volunteer tutors

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By Howard Huntington
of the Daily Courier

Bette Mohr was an office worker in Boston when she saw an advertisement for tutors. "I did not know how to teach people to read," she said. "I didn't know how we learned to read. All I knew was that I did."

After two weeks of training in a church basement, the future member of the Literacy Council for Josephine County was assigned to a man, 26, older than she was at the time. "He worked as a house painter, but he really didn't know how to read," Mohr said.

"He was always trying to cover up, and they're very good at covering up and finding ways to get around it. But when he had this little girl, he

wanted to read stories to her and help her with her homework, and be a fully functioning parent.

"I would take the subway to this church and he would come from another direction on the subway, and we would meet there with all the tutors in the bottom of the church."

On one of those subway rides, the man saw an ad for Wrigley's gum and had a revelation. He sounded everything out, and suddenly words started falling together like the tumblers of a safe he had never been able to open.

"From there on, he made lots of progress," Mohr said. "That was what made me decide that I wanted to be a teacher. That was the most fun thing I had done since college. I gave him a little book at the

end to read to his daughter. What I learned there helped me teach my own children to read."

Working with the Literacy Council in Josephine County has proved just as exhilarating for Mohr. Founded in 1986, the all-volunteer nonprofit organization elevates adults with free tutoring in reading, writing, math and English-language skills. "I've taught in the jail, Mohr said. "I had a class of six Spanish-speaking men."

Spanish? Try *Chinese*. She did. In the council equivalent of a baton race, Mohr and four other tutors spent years preparing a Hong Kong restaurant cook, Xiao Liu, to pass the exam for U.S. citizenship.

"I wondered how you would do it," confessed Mohr — who spoke no Chinese. "Chinese is

so different from English," and it's a particularly big leap for Chinese-speaking stay-at-home moms and others like Liu who have little public contact on the job.

"There are ways of teaching, using sign language and lots of repetition," Mohr said. "It helps if you can translate for them, but when you put it together, they actually do teach themselves, just with your help."

"They help each other, too. There's a big network of people of all different levels of English speakers who help each other in their community." The same is true for the many Vietnamese who have taken council classes, Mohr said.

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She's eager to take on the council's new program for dyslexics — a disorder that can turn words and phrases into fruit salad.

"We've had wonderful success with our foreign-language people that come," Mohr said, "but it's more difficult with the English speakers who just can't read."

The council was about to have its own revelation: Most or all of the basic-education students who lack reading or writing skills have dyslexia or another learning disability, said Dee Pierce, vice chairwoman of the council's board. "In many cases, it had not necessarily been diagnosed. They may not have been aware of it, or they were aware of a learning disability, but they had never gotten specific help targeted toward that disability."

Dyslexia is the most common reading disability, estimated to affect as many as one in five Americans to some degree. But Oregon apparently has no official program for screening elementary or middle school students, she said.

In learning more about the

disorder and the Barton method for correcting it, some council tutors realized *they* were dyslexic to one degree or another, Pierce said.

In extreme cases, a dyslexic may be able to pronounce individual letters such as "b," "a" and "g," but not blend them into "bag."

Some get around the problem by memorizing the pronunciation of words by sight, but that has its limits.

The Barton method teaches them to sound out words. "If done properly," Pierce said, "they should be able to pronounce a word they have never seen before — any word in the English language."

"Our success," Pierce added, "is due to the hard work and determination of our students and the talent and dedication of our tutors and other volunteers."

For more information on the program, call 541-472-0355 or go online to literacyjoco.weebly.com.

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