

# Prisoners of Illiteracy

## Chances for a new life given to adults learning to read

**I** magine looking at a page in a book and not being able to read it. Or not getting a job because you can't fill out the application.

Until four months ago, Ray Bidler Sr. knew what it was like. Bidler was functionally illiterate.

A victim of dyslexia, Bidler also lacked phonics skills. He graduated from Lincoln High School in 1979 at a third-grade reading level. Out of seven children in his family, Bidler was the only one to graduate.

Dyslexia caused Bidler to see letters backwards or out of order. He says his lack of phonics skills made it difficult for him to break words down into syllables. He eventually grew out of the dyslexia, he says, and has worked to overcome his deficiencies through tutoring and classes.

Bidler says school was difficult for him. His father, who dropped out of school, was in the service, forcing the family to move often. Bidler says he attended about nine schools.

Although his parents considered hiring a tutor for him, they decided against it because of the cost. Instead, he was placed in special-education classes.

"I skipped a lot," Bidler says. "The teachers didn't care. They didn't really want to work with me. They just wanted to pass me on and get me out of their hair."

"Because of it all, I was more by myself. I didn't have many friends, and I wasn't in sports."

"I was ashamed. I thought it was something I did myself — that I was too stupid to read. I was told that a lot when I was young."

"The way the schools are, there's one teacher for 45 students. They didn't care. They didn't put forth the effort. A lot had to do with thinking I was too stupid."

**B**urney Bouslough, director of adult education at the Nebraska Department of Education, says illiteracy may stem from influences within the family: the priority put on education, whether parents encourage reading and read in front of their children, and whether they pass on the importance of reading and getting an education.

Lois Poppe, manager of the

Lincoln Literacy Center, says there are many different reasons, including physical disabilities, poverty, lack of motivation, behavioral problems and mental retardation.

Poppe says in some situations children are pulled from school so they can help the family financially. In other cases, the family is too poor to buy aids such as glasses, but the child goes to school anyway and is too ashamed to admit it.

**“It was hard to do anything. I couldn't get a job. Anything you do, you have to know how to read. It was very embarrassing. I have kids and I can't read to them.”**

—Bidler

From the perspective of the Lincoln Literacy Center, it doesn't matter what the fault is, she says.

"Our concern is what we can do about it," Poppe says. "The fault is in the past. We concentrate on what we can do to change it."

And Bidler, a 27-year-old inmate at the Community Corrections Center-Lincoln and a divorcee with two boys, has put the past behind him. He says he doesn't know if his illiteracy has had an effect on his children.

"I hope it doesn't affect them," he says. "I make sure to watch him. The oldest is in first grade. I ask him how his reading is going. I ask his mother. I stress to her to ask the teachers all the time. I don't know if dyslexia is hereditary."

**A**n illiterate parent may embarrass the child. Poppe says children often feel different from their friends and are uncomfortable.

Curt Sederburg, coordinator of the Adult Academic Studies program at Southeast Community

College, agrees. He says the children may be sheltered from other opportunities and usually lack the opportunity to receive help from their parents. Yet their parents often encourage them to continue their education, he says.

Poppe says many children get excited when their parents make the effort to learn how to read.

Dwight Grandgenett, reading consultant for the Lincoln Public Schools System, says a parent's illiteracy can have positive and negative effects on a child. On the positive side, he says parents tell their children the difficulties they've had and stress that they be attentive.

On the negative side, Grandgenett says, the parents may have been successful without an education, passing the attitude on to their children. However, he says, many parents now want their children to be literate.

Grandgenett says schools use the same teaching techniques on all students.

"We make the assumption that we're going to teach them in school," he says. "We use the best technology available for everyone."

Grandgenett says he assumes the schools have graduated functionally illiterate students. He says when the causes of reading difficulty are reviewed, there are many reasons students can graduate. He says students may hide their problem or have so many negative aspects in their life that they can't concentrate on school.

"Literacy doesn't know economic boundaries," he says. "For various reasons, there are students who have difficulty learning in any socio-economic group."

**G**randgenett says lower-income students as a group have more literacy problems than higher-income ones.

Bidler says it was embarrassing being illiterate.

"It was hard to do anything," he says. "I couldn't get a job. Anything you do you have to know how to read. It was very embarrassing. I have kids and can't read to them."

"There were jobs I wanted but couldn't take because I couldn't read."

Bidler says he was in a literacy program a few years ago but blew it off. He says he's dedicated now.

Part of that dedication comes from when he accepted Christ two years ago, prompting him to seek help again, he says.

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"It was my third time in jail," he says. "I felt I had to do something to benefit myself, to benefit somebody else from my past."

Poppe says it is difficult to say how many illiterate people there are in the United States because many hide it. However, various organizations have arrived at their own figures. According to Laubach Literacy Action, there are 26 million illiterate people, and each year the number increases by 1 million. Laubach Literacy Action, Poppe says, is an international group with more than 600 community-based programs throughout the world whose purpose is to combat adult illiteracy. She says the group targets low-level reading adults who aren't reached by other educational programs.

Volunteers For Literacy, in Syracuse, N.Y., estimates that one of five Americans is illiterate, Poppe says.

**B**ouslough says the illiteracy rate for Nebraska is 9 percent and 13 percent for the United States, according to the Plus Effort. Bouslough says the Plus Effort started a year ago and is a joint project of PBS, ABC and Project Literacy U.S. He says there is no way of determining if the statistics are increasing or decreasing.

There are 25 federally funded programs at 150 sites throughout Nebraska, Bouslough says. He said the federal government provides 90 percent and the state provides 10 percent in funding. The funds come from the Adult Education Act in the mid-1960s, he says. The act provides help to people who are illiterate and who didn't get their high school diplomas. Bouslough says 94,000 were helped in the last fiscal year.

Nebraska Sen. Arlene Nelson of Grand Island has also successfully secured \$200,000 for adult literacy programs for the education section of Gov. Kay Orr's LB1041.

There are as many reasons for seeking help as there are illiterate people: getting fired from a job when the boss discovers the problem, getting another job, having children who have reached the age to be read to, leaving home, the death of a spouse, and needing to read medicine bottles, Poppe says.

On the other hand, people avoid getting help because they're ashamed to let anyone know, Poppe says. People often hide it from friends and family because they feel something is wrong with them, she said.

**S**ince Bidler started the tutoring sessions, he says he's improved 85 percent. He has gone through six skill books. Currently he is studying from two books: "Megawords 2," which covers prefixes, suffixes and how to break down words, and an adult reading book that teaches him how to break down words and sound them out.

Every Sunday, Katherine Frenchy from the Lincoln Literacy Center goes out to Community Correction Centers-Lincoln to tutor Bidler. The sessions last two to three hours.

"She really cares; she takes her time," Bidler says. "She acts like I'm her kid. She takes that much pride."

Frenchy, supervisor of the mailroom at Nebraska Wesleyan University, says she's gained a lot from tutoring Bidler.

"Hardly a time goes by when he doesn't learn something," Frenchy says. "Seeing him exclaim, 'I didn't know that. You mean I can do that,' is sunshine. When he gets