

2021 Spotlight on Achievement and Service Awards

Secretary of State and State Librarian Jesse White honored the winners of the 2021 Spotlight on Literacy Awards, which recognizes participants in Illinois literacy programs. Ten students received the Spotlight on Achievement Award and 10 volunteer tutors received the Spotlight on Service Award. A virtual ceremony was held to recognize each honoree.

Spotlight on Achievement winners stories:

Karelys Alfaro, Literacy DuPage, Glen Ellyn

Karelys came to the United States from Venezuela arriving with very limited English language skills. In her home country, she worked as an accountant and was able to provide a second income for her family. In the United States, she immediately found it hard to find work given her inability to communicate effectively. She turned to Literacy DuPage that matched her with a tutor to begin her journey into learning the language. Because of her hard work, Karelys has been able to advance from a retail clerk to a marketing associate. She and her husband recently purchased a home for their family.

Betty Davis, Baby TALK, Decatur

Betty never felt like she could be successful in school because she struggled due to a diagnosed learning disability. She dropped out of high school and regretted her decision. Betty came to the Baby TALK family literacy program determined to improve her reading and writing with the goal of earning her high school equivalency. She gets up every day at 5 a.m. and works on her lessons — she feels like she is setting an example for her five children. “I want them to see me trying my best and don’t want them to give up on life even when it gets tough,” says Betty. “We should want better and no one else is going to give it to me, I have to get it myself.” She continues to show excellent progress in reaching her goals.

Vicki Ferguson, Literacy Chicago, Chicago

Vicki’s personal and family life has been enriched ever since she started learning to read. Not only is she able to read better, but has grown her self-confidence by leaps and bounds. Vicki can now understand the words on the page in her book, on the cans and aisles in the grocery store, the signs on the street, the direction of the bus and a multitude of other words used in everyday life. Her frustration with reading has been replaced with a positive challenge to keep learning. Vicki's family has been supportive, and even bought her a computer when she decided to learn how to use one.

Belinda Guillen Rodriguez, Parkland College, Champaign

When Belinda came to Parkland College’s Project READ literacy program, she related an all too common story from one of her first experiences in the United States: She asked a simple question at the grocery store and was misunderstood, then ignored, becoming frustrated and embarrassed. As Belinda studied with Project READ, her vocabulary and confidence grew. She became a volunteer Latino Community Navigator with the New American Welcome Center (NAWC) at the University YMCA in Champaign. Her hard work, positive attitude and determination led to a job at the center, and she is now an Outreach Team Leader, speaking with—and for—those who cannot yet do so for themselves.

Maria Herrera, Tolton Center/De La Salle Institute, Chicago

Through Maria's involvement at Tolton Center, she discovered the importance of being involved in her children's education. The information she learned through Tolton's parenting workshops led her to become one of the most dedicated parents Tolton staff has ever met. She started in the family literacy program six years ago with very little English skills and has advanced to an intermediate level that has allowed her to become an active member of her community and a tireless advocate for many different causes, especially family literacy.

Hazar Makkawi, Corazon a Corazon, Blue Island

Hazar came to the United States with her family 11 years ago from Sudan. She had attended medical school in her home country and hoped to be able to practice in America. She passed all of the exams necessary to become certified and work in the United States, but she had a lot of difficulty communicating with others because of her lack of fluency when speaking. Hazar began attending a conversation circle at her local library that led to enrolling at Corazon a Corazon, where she has worked with a tutor to improve her speaking ability. She is becoming more fluent on a daily basis and plans to pursue a master's degree in public health.

Goudile Mukamunzi, Howard Area Community Center, Chicago

Goudile has spent the last year at Howard Area using her tutoring time to prepare for the U.S. citizenship test. Her speaking and conversation skills have improved greatly, and she can now answer most of the civics questions on the citizenship test. She has improved her reading and writing ability to the point where she can accurately complete those sections of the test. She has made these remarkable gains in her abilities while juggling the responsibilities of being a mother to five school-age children.

Charles Safari, Howard Area Community Center, Chicago

Charles is Goudile Mukamuzin's husband and is also working toward U.S. citizenship. He spends his tutoring time preparing for the interview, civics questions, and the reading and writing portions of the test. He continues to spend time working on his language and English-speaking skills. His outstanding improvements have helped him in his job where he can better communicate with his co-workers, as well as with daily life activities like taking a bus. Staff at the center believe that his continued growth and ability will translate into sure success in fulfilling his dream of becoming a U.S. citizen.

Shamim Shakir, Chinese Mutual Aid Association, Chicago

Three years ago, Shamim immigrated to the United States from Pakistan to be with her husband. She experienced many challenges upon her arrival, but her determination to thrive in her new environment was unwavering. Shamim was a teacher in her home country. She has assimilated in her new surroundings and in learning English. She is quick to help others in her classes with pronunciation and spelling when she sees they need help. She is in the process of obtaining her driver's license so she can be a better candidate for a job as a nanny.

Jeiling Wemple, Chinese Mutual Aid Association, Chicago

Jeiling came to the United States from China in 2016. She moved across the globe unable to speak any English. In five years, she has greatly improved her ability to read, write and speak English because of her determination. Her progress has enabled her to prepare her own resume and interview for jobs that align with her goal of eventually owning and managing her own bakery. She works three jobs and cares for an ailing family member, and she still makes time to continue her learning.

Spotlight on Service winner stories:

Nelson Lee Beneze, Lewis and Clark Community College, Godfrey

The Staff members at Lewis and Clark Community College's Project Read literacy program state that the reason they nominated Lee for the award was because of his enthusiasm, his unwavering commitment to each learner and his big heart. He regularly accepts tutoring assignments with adult learners who have special circumstances or needs that require extra attention. His focus has become math tutoring. Over his time with the program, Lee has tutored more than 30 learners. So far, 12 students have successfully passed the math portion of the high school equivalency exam.

Sanjee Choudhuri, Literacy Chicago, Chicago

Growing up, Sanjee was always told that if you are good at something, never do it for free. After serving as a volunteer tutor for the last several years, he now believes that if you are good at something, use it to uplift those around you. He has been tutoring an adult learner weekly for over a year in math, so she can learn to count money for potential job opportunities. He believes that he is benefiting from reciprocal learning, as she has taught him about resilience, persistence and tenacity. Sanjee has also used his professional expertise to help the literacy program refine its ability to collect learner statistics.

Lilly Chow, Chinese Mutual Aid Association, Chicago

Lilly's passion for tutoring adult learners in English stems from her parents' experience as U.S. immigrants from Taiwan and the struggles they faced. She understands the work it takes to develop knowledge not only of the language, but also of the culture in order to become an active member of a new community. She takes this experience into each tutoring session and works very hard to meet the needs of her adult learners. She has developed a strong personal relationship with her learners and has become a very important part of their lives.

Wealtha Yoder Helland, The Literacy Council, Rockford

A couple of summers ago, Wealtha volunteered her time to lead a summer session called "Inspire to Read." This is where she met an emigrant from Bangladesh. She soon began working with him on learning English and assisting him in many other areas, including searching for a job. In one instance, he had a problem with his taxes so Wealtha called the IRS, and together they talked to the agency and were able to get the correct forms and instructions to fix the situation. Her relationship with him has truly become more than tutor and learner—they have become family and friends.

Pete Howlett, Howard Area Community Center, Chicago

After tutoring for a while at Howard Area, Pete decided to learn more about the process of an individual becoming a U.S. citizen. He has participated in citizenship trainings and has become involved in helping adult learners with preparation for the citizenship test. Pete is tutoring the husband and wife Spotlight on Achievement winners and has helped them in all areas of their English language acquisition, along with their goal of becoming U.S. citizens. He demonstrates how devoting a small portion of your time to a volunteer program can have amazing benefits in many different ways.

Penny Lopez, Parkland College, Champaign

Penny is an example of a tutor to emulate. She interjects energy into every conversation, every email and every tutoring session that affects everyone she meets. She dedicates her time to not only tutoring but also assisting other causes and organizations in the community. Penny works hard to incorporate real-world events into her lesson planning. During her first online tutoring session, she encouraged her students to discuss the feelings of isolation they were experiencing under quarantine to help them understand that they were not alone. She has become a role model and mentor for other tutors in the program.

Aviva W. Rubin, Oakton Community College, Skokie

As a retired elementary school teacher, Aviva was well-versed in teaching methods but soon realized that she would need to rethink those methods when applying them to adult learners. What makes her special is her ability and willingness to adapt her long existing teaching skills and to learn along with her students. She is open to incorporating new strategies in her role as a tutor. She primarily tutors immigrant women—encouraging them to write and talk about their lives in their native country. She believes that the relationships created with her students are an important part of their journey to becoming comfortable in their adopted culture and home.

Dora L. Smith, Prairie State College, Chicago Heights

Dora's dedication during the pandemic was a driving force in keeping Prairie State College's adult literacy program active and providing services when direct contact with adult learners was not allowed. Her creative methods impacted a number of learners this past year. An adult learner who recently passed his CDL exam said of Dora, "She is a powerful tutor who taught me so many different ways to achieve my goals. She is extremely patient, for which I am truly grateful."

Marlea A. Smith, Literacy DuPage, Glen Ellyn

Marlea credits her father for teaching her that service to others is why we are here on Earth. After a long teaching career, she decided to continue helping others by becoming a volunteer literacy tutor. She is currently working with a group of eight to 10 women each week in an English conversation group at her local library. The group does more than just practice English, they gather to support each other in many ways and have become essential parts of each other's lives. Marlea's initiative, dedication, support and guidance have been driving forces behind the group's success.

C. Ann Vogel, Danville Community College, Danville

Ann has a master's degree in special education, and she has brought her experience and skills to the college's Readers Route adult literacy program. She is able to discern quickly a learner's individual needs, providing the right learning materials for them to succeed. The program refers to her as "The Mailman," because neither rain nor snow stops her from coming in and spending countless hours per week tutoring. Her patience and guidance with the learners have a lasting effect on them.