



Placer Adult Literacy Service (PALS)

helping adults turn a new page in life

They come in all shapes and sizes, ethnicities, genders, age groups and even income brackets. Yet when they sit down across from Paula Westernen at the Auburn Library, they all share one very important thing in common.

They can't read.

Since 1985, the [Placer Adult Literacy Service](#) has helped hundreds of adults overcome illiteracy aided since 1991 by the volunteers of the Literacy Support Council of Placer County, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit and certified United Way agency. Surprisingly, one in five adults are functionally illiterate in the U.S. and it's folks like Paula, Placer County's Library Literacy Specialist, and volunteer reading coaches, that help "Learners" from all walks of life overcome their literacy challenge.

"Often this is thought of as a poor person's issue," Paula remarks. "It's not. It cuts across socioeconomic backgrounds. You have everyone from struggling single moms to very successful business owners who come to us for help." Why do they seek assistance? The reasons are as different as a crime novel is from a cookbook.

"I had one man who came for help because he just wanted to read his "own damn TV Guide," Paula says with a smile. "Some want to be able to read books to their children or grandchildren. One mom even came for help because she realized she didn't have the reading skills to help her daughter with her homework. When she finished the program, her daughter said, 'I'm so proud of you, Mom!'"

But coming for help is no small task.

"It's a very shameful thing for many Learners and most have developed tremendous coping skills," she says. "Coming forward for help is difficult and progress is often slow."

Yet there are so many success stories ... stories of bus drivers who learn to read and get promoted, Dads who come for help to break the cycle of illiteracy in their family, even Moms who just want to be able to read a recipe or find their way around the local hospital.

Of course, every Learner deserves a Coach and the volunteers who serve in that role are also a diverse group. "One thing they have in common is a passion for reading," she says, noting that current volunteers include high school students doing senior projects, to senior citizens with the time and energy to meet 1-2 hours a week to help.

How has the United Way helped? In a word: Immensely.

During the early years when a small group of volunteers worked diligently to raise funds for the organization, the United Way provided seed money to keep the fledgling organization going. Since that time, the United Way has regularly provided funding support, as well as the opportunity to speak in front of important business groups in search of added financial backing. "We've come a long way since those early days and the United Way was instrumental in helping us get where we are today," says Richard Cushman, Vice President of the Literacy Support Council of Placer County. "We wouldn't be where we are today without them."