

2 DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

Dr. Sandra Baxter

3 INSTITUTE WELCOMES BASU**4 BOYS, BOOKS,
AND BARBERSHOPS**

Bringing community together

6 UP CLOSE INTERVIEW

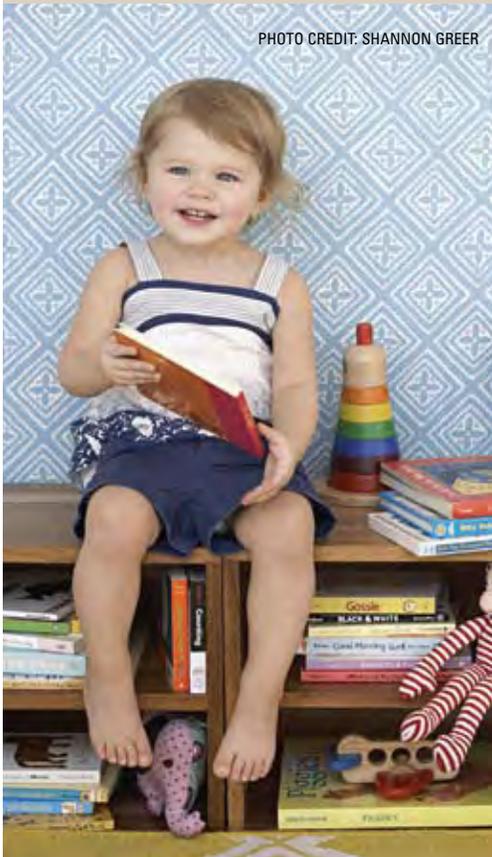
John Corcoran writes new chapter

NEWS IN BRIEF

**THE INSTITUTE IN
PARENTS MAGAZINE**

"Reading to your toddler is one of the best ways to boost language skills," says **Andrea Grimaldi**, senior program officer for Early Childhood, who was quoted in the July *Parents* magazine story, *I love Storytime: The best way to read to your toddler*. Read the complete story on our website www.nifl.gov.

PHOTO CREDIT: SHANNON GREER



Catalyst

A PUBLICATION FROM THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR LITERACY FALL 2008 ISSUE 2

Shanahan on the National Early Literacy Panel Report: What's in Store

To help build a body of scientific evidence on young children's early literacy development and on home and family influences on that development, the Institute, in 2002, funded a group of nine nationally recognized experts, known as the National Early Literacy Panel (NELP). The panel reviewed the research on language, literacy, and communication in young children ages birth through five. As the panel's long-awaited report nears its release this fall, **Timothy Shanahan**, chairman of the NELP, took time out to talk about its findings, what parents and teachers can expect, and why the report will be worth the wait.

Shanahan, who served on the National Reading Panel, is also a member of the Institute's Advisory Board and a past president of the International Reading Association. The internationally recognized reading researcher with extensive experience working with children in Head Start, those with special needs, and in inner-city schools, is a professor of urban education at the University of Illinois at Chicago and director of its Center for Literacy.

This interview was conducted, condensed, and edited by B. Denise Hawkins.

What did the National Early Literacy Panel or NELP set out to do?

The NELP reviewed research on beginning literacy ability. The National Reading Panel looked at traditional school-aged kids and then the issue became what about pre-schoolers and kindergartners? The NELP was charged with taking a good careful look at the early years as children develop literacy skills.



Timothy Shanahan, Chairman, National Early Literacy Panel

Work on the NELP report has been underway for a number of years. For many, the findings have been much anticipated. What news is in store for those who have been eagerly awaiting results and updates about what the literature says about the effectiveness of instructional strategies, programs, and practices for young children?

Those who have never done this kind of work don't realize the extent of the effort. The panel has spent a lot of time going through the research very carefully and systematically, looking at hundreds of studies that have been conducted over the years and trying to make sense of them and how they fit together. I think that the public and the field will find that the report will have been worth the wait.

While I don't think that there will be any big surprises in the findings, there may be a few small surprises along the way. The findings will

From Non-Reader to Acclaimed Author, John Corcoran Keeps Turning Pages

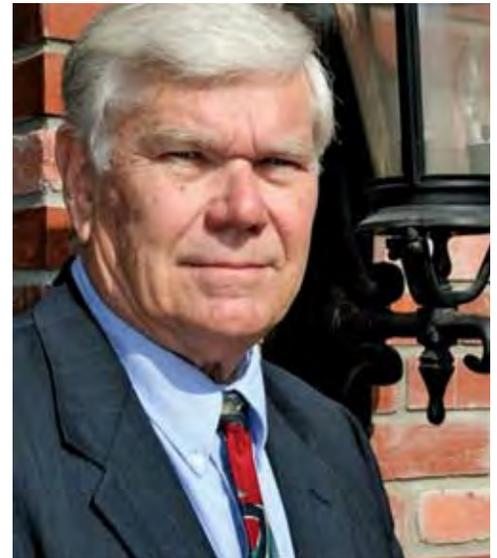
John Corcoran, 70, is a national literacy advocate. Two U.S. presidents tapped him to serve on the National Institute for Literacy's Advisory Board. And he's written two books. But 22 years ago, Corcoran lived a life of secrecy and shame. He was "illiterate."

He still remembers the constant childhood prayer he whispered at night — “please God, tomorrow when it's my turn to read, please let me read,” and being placed in the “dumb row” in school.

“I couldn't read, I couldn't write a sentence. I was illiterate,” said Corcoran who learned to read at age 48 with the help of a volunteer literacy tutor.

Growing up, Corcoran managed to bounce from grade to grade without knowing

how to read, cheating and maneuvering his way all the way to college. In 1961, he completed college while still not being able to read. Surprisingly, that didn't stop Corcoran from becoming a high school teacher, a job he held in the Oceanside School District for nearly two decades with the help of dedicated teaching assistants and by creating an oral and visual classroom environment. Corcoran never used the written word in his classroom, he recalls in his 1994 book, *The Teacher Who*



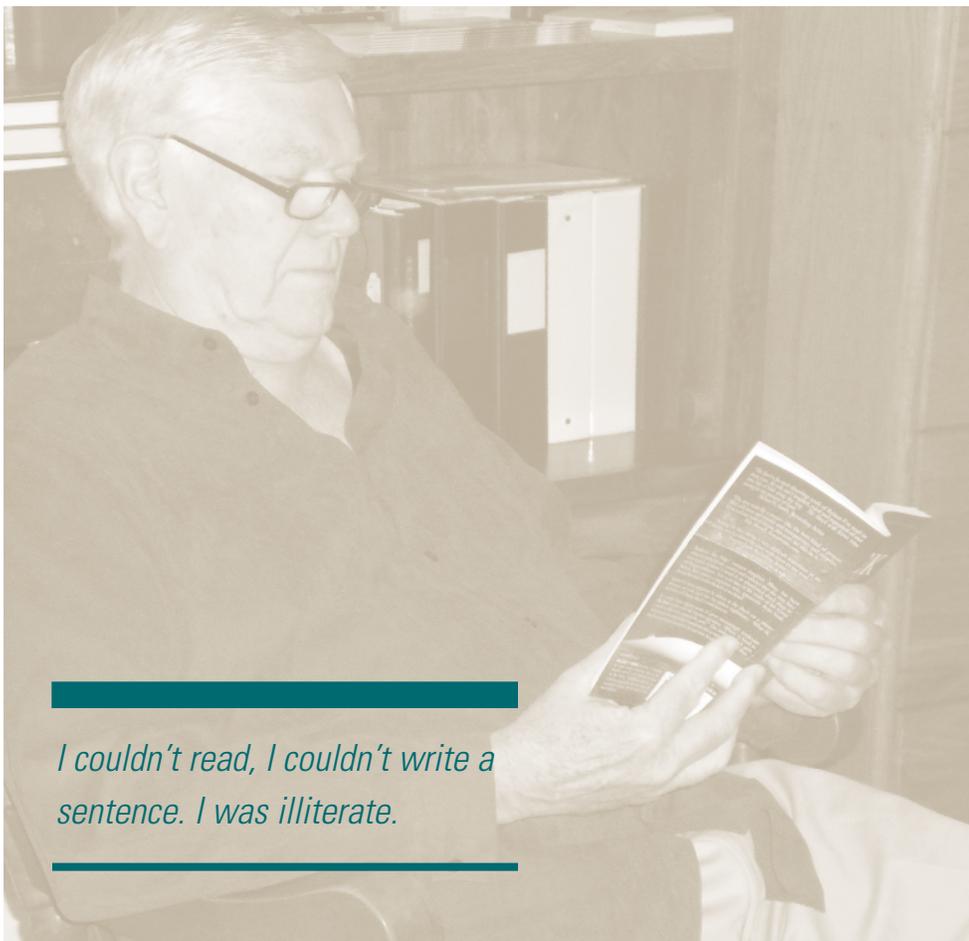
Couldn't Read. The book was re-released on September 2. His new book, *Bridge to Literacy: No Child or Adult Left Behind*, is due out in October.

This interview was conducted, condensed, and edited by B. Denise Hawkins.

Q: In your first highly acclaimed book, *The Teacher Who Couldn't Read*, you unveiled an intensely personal account of John Corcoran the child who was not taught how to read and of John Corcoran the adult who lived with the shame of “his illiteracy.” But in your new book, *Bridge to Literacy*, you issue what you describe as a call to action... “to gather all the tribes within literacy.” Can you talk about the need for such a call and who should gather with you on the bridge to literacy?

Corcoran: About 25 percent of the population learns to read like birds learn to fly. They walk by the library and they just get it. At the opposite end of the spectrum, 25-30 percent of the population has difficulty processing the language.

Living life to the fullest in America today includes mastering reading and writing skills. Reading makes you smarter. There is no equal opportunity in the classroom or workplace without basic reading and writing skills. The dominant language of the classroom and the workplace is the written word. Many parents, teachers, educators, and policymakers are



I couldn't read, I couldn't write a sentence. I was illiterate.

already on the bridge to literacy. However, *all* literate people need to share their precious gift of literacy. They need to understand the problem and be proactive in solving the problems. Illiteracy affects us all. Being able to read and write leads to healthier, more cohesive families, confidence, higher learning, a better workplace, and a stronger economy.

Already on the bridge are many passionate and committed people, yet there is room for more.

Q: There is stigma associated with the term “illiterate” and the National Institute for Literacy discourages its use to describe and define those who can’t read or who have below average reading, writing, and oral skills. You use the term often and casually to describe yourself and others. What meaning does the term hold for you?

Corcoran: I consciously chose that word. When I first learned to read and shared my story, people kept asking me if I was learning disabled and they asked me if I was dyslexic? All I knew from my own perception was that I couldn’t read. I still use that language. I do think that (illiterate) is the most direct language. It is harsh, but I don’t want anybody taking harshness out of it. It means you can’t read. People would ask me “what level do you read at?” I am a college graduate. It doesn’t matter if I read at the third grade level or the fourth grade level. I couldn’t read, I couldn’t write a sentence. I couldn’t write a paragraph. I was illiterate.

But here I am, someone who’s been frightened by words all his life. Now I’m choosing words that are my words.

I would have to say I was learning disabled, but I could build a house, I could do a lot of things, so why would you think I was disabled? I just had a difficult time learning to read. It took me so long to read because I never had the proper instruction and that was really the problem. There never was anything really wrong with my brain.

I never really identified with any of that [being learning disabled] and I have a little bit of trouble with the term “disabled.”

“Dis” literally means “not” — not able. Why would I want a teacher that’s supposed to impart skills to...use the word “not able” to describe their student? I’d rather use the word “deficiency.” A deficiency is something that can be taken care of.

Q: What are you reading now?

Corcoran: *Quiet Strength* by Tony Dungy; *The Purpose Driven Life* by Rick Warren; and *Ishi in Two Worlds: a Biography of the Last Wild Indian in North America* by Theodora Kroeber.

I love to read for information. I read history, periodicals, short essays, and “how-to” books. I read English textbooks for building English skills because when I first learned to read, I couldn’t write a sentence or a paragraph so I’ve had to start from the ground up. Every now and then, I sit down and read the thesaurus.

Q: What challenges, if any, do you still face with reading and writing? Although you can now read, do you still consider yourself an adult learner?

Corcoran: I feel comfortable as a reader because I can read anything I need to, now. With writing, however, it’s a long production because I’m still learning grammar. My spelling has greatly improved. I keep an electronic dictionary with me all the time.

In the first stage of my reading, I referred to myself as a “new reader.” Then I became a “developing literate” and after 10 years I started thinking of myself as a literate person who could read independently, probably at the college level. I often refer to non-readers as “we” because I still identify with the culture and experience of not being able to read. My wife has to remind me that I’m literate now.

I consider myself a lifelong learner. Even as an adult, I’ve always felt like we all have something to learn.

Q: What documents, papers, or books have you heard about and been intrigued by that you want to read but can’t because of their level of complexity?

Corcoran: History intrigues me. I read high school-level textbooks to get the

simpler version. I also like to watch historical documentaries. *The Republic* by Plato is a book I recall whose density and complexity ended up not being worth my energy. When reading the *Bible*, the challenge there is not so much the concepts, but the proper names.

I have read the Bill of Rights and I understand those concepts. Since learning to read, I have an interest in law and a new respect for it. I also have an aptitude for reading and comprehending legal documents, which is rooted in my business experience.

Q: You were the first adult learner to serve on the National Institute for Literacy’s Advisory Board in 1992. Did you ever dream that you would one day be tapped by two presidents (George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton) to help influence the nation’s literacy agenda?

Corcoran: It was an honor to be appointed by a president and to serve under two presidents. I never imagined in my wildest dreams that I would share my embarrassing shameful secret with anyone other than my wife, especially not with the nation. A secret I had guarded for over four decades became a tool to influence our nation’s literacy agenda.

Q: Despite the personal and professional strides you have made in the fields of education, literacy, and business, do you think that you will long be known as the teacher who couldn’t read? What is the teacher who *can* read doing today?

Corcoran: I have come to terms with the embarrassing and shameful public title of “the teacher who couldn’t read” because it is an attention-getter that has allowed me the opportunity to share my story and issue a call to action. Although the headline of my experience is *The Teacher who Couldn’t Read*, it is not the story. I get to tell the story which is “America can’t read.” I am no longer the teacher who can’t read, I am the teacher who can read. I am not a teacher in the classroom anymore. I am a teacher on the bridge.

Continued on page 8

Corcoran Continued from Page 6

The John Corcoran Foundation's mission is to facilitate the prevention and eradication of illiteracy in children and adults across America. We are currently launching a *Community Read Program* to create awareness. To date; we have tutored over 2,000 students and trained over 300 tutors. We are very busy!

Q: The African proverb says: "It takes a village to raise a child." Who and what will it take to ensure that all children can read by the time they reach the critical third-grade threshold?

Corcoran: Parents are a child's first and most important teacher. Some parents read to their children and prepare them before they go to school. Too many other parents cannot read and thus cannot prepare their children for school. In America, we require that all children attend school for sixteen years and yet we must accept children where they are.

It is the responsibility of schools and teachers to impart the values and skills of literacy to all students. Forty million dollars worth of research in the last decade has told us how to teach little boys and girls like me to read. The challenge is to close the gap between what we know to be true and what we are actually doing.

Q: How do we do that?

Corcoran: What is needed is diagnostic testing for all students throughout their education and proper instruction by properly trained teachers. A properly trained teacher comes from an adequate university that offers research-based training and instruction.

Q: In *Bridge to Literacy*, you cite Reading First as the nation's most successful early reading initiative. Now, as the prospect of the demise of Reading First looms, what do you foresee as a new or continued role for the federal government in improving reading instruction?

Corcoran: Because of the controversial and emotionally charged No Child Left

Behind Act (NCLB), the critical component in the legislation, Reading First, looks like it's going to be an innocent victim of a head-on collision.

We can't simply blame our schools and teachers and we can't simply blame NCLB for America's literacy epidemic and our frustration with school failure.

Illiteracy crosses the boundaries of political parties. We have the blueprint to teach children to read, which includes properly trained teachers, accountability, and remedial instruction. The only cure for illiteracy is literacy. I am hopeful that the new administration will show courage and leadership. It is the role of the federal government to improve reading instruction and ensure accountability for the sake of our children.

Q: As the U.S. joins countries around the world in observing International Literacy Day on September 8, we know that there are little boys and girls who wake up every morning like you once did, wishing that they knew how to read. We know that there are courageous adult learners who are on the path to literacy but who ask themselves, the question you once asked yourself, "why did it take me so long to learn how to read?"

What will you be doing to mark International Literacy Day and how will you remember those boys and girls and men and women who are struggling?

Corcoran: I will be celebrating International Literacy Day in Santa Fe at the New Mexico Coalition for Literacy, which includes a Proclamation from the governor and a press conference in the Capital Rotunda. I will remember and honor those boys and girls and men and women by continuing to remind America that even with all of our noble efforts, there is still a massive education gap and the epidemic of illiteracy raging on. In America today, illiteracy is a form of child neglect and child abuse. I was

once that little boy and that ashamed adult. My message is that we can all learn to read with proper instruction and it is never too late to learn. Today, it is as important to teach an adult to read as it is to teach a child to read.

Q: Are you hopeful that the actions you and others concerned about literacy and learning are taking will result in the realization of a new vision of literacy in America?

Corcoran: I am hopeful because we are a country that believes in equal opportunity. However, there is no equal opportunity without basic reading and writing skills. The demand for literacy skills is especially increasing in today's technological economy. In the last decade the research tells us that

There is no equal opportunity in the classroom or workplace without basic reading and writing skills.

everyone can learn to read and describes the proper way to teach someone. The research has validated my own personal experience and I have met thousands of men and women from every walk of life who are ardent advocates for a literate America.

Q: What advice do you give to children and youth struggling with reading and adult learners who cannot read?

Corcoran: Reading and writing are skills that we can all learn. It is hard work for some of us to learn how to read and it takes time. We're not dumb. Never give up on yourself. It's not too late. I learned when I was 48! I can tell the kids "don't give up on yourself," but it is equally important to tell the adult in the room, "not to give up on the child." ■

Join the Institute's Discussion List

**ADULT ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS • ADULT LITERACY PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
ASSESSMENT • FAMILY LITERACY • HEALTH LITERACY • LEARNING DISABILITIES
DIVERSITY & LITERACY • SPECIAL TOPICS
TECHNOLOGY & LITERACY • WORKPLACE LITERACY**

Choose one or join them all. Visit <http://www.nifl.gov/lincs/discussions/discussions.html> to subscribe to our online discussion lists where thousands of literacy stakeholders have the opportunity to discuss the literacy field's critical issues; share resources, experiences, and ideas; ask questions of subject experts; and keep up-to-date on literacy issues.

STAY CONNECTED AND ON TOP OF THE NEWS AND INFORMATION FROM THE FIELD

 **National Institute for Literacy**
1775 I Street, NW, Suite 730
Washington, DC 20006-2417