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If you can read this, don't read this

By [Gianna May](#) | DAILY LOBO

Forty-six percent of New Mexican adults can't read above a fifth-grade level, and the New Mexico Coalition for Literacy is trying to change that one reader at a time.

The coalition is dedicated to eliminating adult illiteracy and providing services to those who want to learn how to read, said Heather Heunermund, executive director of the coalition.

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"A lot of people still don't know that illiteracy exists," she said. And that's where the Celebration of Literacy comes in.

This year, the celebration will feature around 10 local celebrities, such as Mayor Berry and his wife, who will read a passage from their favorite books and say a few words about why literacy is important, Heunermund said.

Marten Griego, a speaker at the event, suffered from illiteracy, unable to read until well past his 50s. At 54, he was a depressed, alcoholic drug addict who read at a fifth-grade level. He said he chose to change his life and went to Readwest Inc., a company of literary volunteers, where it took him nine years to become fully literate.

Thanks to the tutoring, he is now a published author who gives lectures about his life, his struggles and the importance of reading.

"It has impacted my life by having the ability to find out who I am, what I am, and why I've done what I have done with my life and how to change it," Griego said. "This is your life. You are the director; you are the writer, and you are the producer of your movie... You're the star of the show, and you have the right to change the movie any time you want."

Griego said without Readwest tutor Gordon Suits, whom he called his "best supporting actor," he wouldn't be where he is today.

Hakim Bellamy, a local poet and journalist who is scheduled to read at the celebration, said literacy is the prerequisite to becoming intelligent.

"There is no 'too proud or too late' to learn. ... It quadruples the quality of your life," he said.

"Reading helps you organize and connect thoughts, and, as a result, be a better writer, speaker and reader."

Of course, the celebration is not the only time when people from the community can reach the coalition or Readwest, Heunermund said.

"The need is great, so we wanted to make sure that people knew that there are programs in New Mexico," she said. "All they have to do is give us a call, and we will refer them. We are also looking for volunteers for the program."

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