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Group takes on illiteracy in NM

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The New Mexico Coalition for Literacy will celebrate Literacy Day today at the Rotunda in Santa Fe.

John Corcoran, an Albuquerque native and author of the memoir *The Teacher Who Couldn't Read*, is the keynote speaker.

"The title of the book defies logic and is almost unbelievable," Corcoran said. "To me, the story is about America's illiteracy epidemic that's going on right now. It's an invisible epidemic that is becoming more visible."

Corcoran spent much of his childhood in Albuquerque. He lived on Stanford Avenue and played on the UNM campus. He attended Jefferson Middle School and Highland High School.

"I was a little boy who went to school with high hopes that didn't learn how to read," Corcoran said. "By the time I got to high school, I decided to take my story underground and not tell anybody. That's when I started consciously and intentionally cheating. I never wrote a term paper."

Corcoran, now 70, guarded his secret until he was 48. By then he had graduated from the University of Texas at El Paso and taught English in a California high school for 17 years.

He was at the reading level of a second grader, he said.

Corcoran developed his reading skills past a 12th-grade level by finding a tutor in a public library. He spent 13 months learning to read independently.

"The key to teaching little boys and little girls, like me, to read, write and spell is proper instruction," he said. "Proper instruction comes from properly trained teachers that come from universities that properly prepared them."

The state Coalition for Literacy is recruiting volunteer tutors to help adults, like Corcoran, learn to read.

The group organized the event to raise awareness about New Mexico's high illiteracy rate, said Heather Heunermund, the executive director of the coalition.

"Forty-six percent of all New Mexico adults can't read at the fifth-grade level," she said.

Heunermund said people below the fifth-grade level could not seek employment in two-thirds of all jobs in America. Those who are illiterate can only apply to one-tenth of all jobs, she said.

Most illiterate adults graduated from high school, and some - such as Corcoran - received college degrees, Heunermund said.

As a result, illiterate parents are unable to educate their children outside of the classroom.

"You're not able to read to your children. You're not able to help them with their homework," Heunermund said.

She said Corcoran had a similar experience with his daughter.

Corcoran pretended to read to his daughter in order to hide his illiteracy. He refused to read her books with which he was unfamiliar.

"He had her pull one of the old, familiar books off the shelf so that he could pretend to be reading it," Heunermund said.

She said illiterate adults learn to adapt, but their illiteracy inevitably catches up with them.

"They're highly adaptive and brilliant in coping mechanisms," Heunermund said, "but they reach an impasse at some point."

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