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Virginia Pulver, recruitment consultant for the New Mexico Coalition for Literacy, gives a tour of the coalition's Resource Center, which stocks books and videos for students and tutors in its literacy programs statewide. - Ana Maria Trujillo/The New Mexican



Allies in reading: Program plans event to raise awareness on illiteracy

Ana Maria Trujillo | The New Mexican
Posted: Saturday, August 28, 2010 - 8/22/10

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Marten Griego of Albuquerque turned his life around when he made the decision to be sober 18 years ago. Over the years, everything in his life got better. He began to love himself and wanted to do things that made him happy, such as dancing. He even met a nice lady — an English literature teacher.

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"For the first time in my life, I felt real happiness," Griego said.

But his new companion wasn't comfortable with his secret: Griego had a hard time reading and writing.

"She told me she couldn't date me because my grammar was so bad. In the old days, I would have gotten angry and made a big mess. I do believe sobriety was there, along with confidence, to face my darkest issue."

Griego, who said he used to read at about a fifth-grade level, sought help. The South Valley native didn't want family or friends to know he needed help with his reading, so he sought help at ReadWest, a Rio Rancho adult literacy program in 1998.

"Not even my children knew I had so much trouble reading and writing," Griego said. "Rio Rancho is a community a lot of my friends didn't know about."

He was paired with a tutor, improved his literacy skills and is now a tutor and literacy advocate who travels the country doing motivational speeches. He even wrote a book titled Leaving the House of Tears.

Griego will be one of several guest speakers at the Santa Fe-based New Mexico Coalition for Literacy event called A Celebration of Literacy on Sept. 8 at the Outpost performance Space in Albuquerque.

The event had previously been held in Santa Fe, said the coalition's executive director, Heather Heunermund, but this year the organization wanted to do the event in Albuquerque.

"We thought we'd go to a more urban area because the need is higher there," Heunermund said. The Celebration of Literacy is a way the coalition celebrates Literacy Day in New Mexico.

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"All of our literacy programs kick off their own celebrations in their own cities," Heunermund said. The New Mexico Coalition for Literacy is an organization that provides funding, training, professional development and assistance to literacy programs throughout New Mexico, including Literacy Volunteers of Santa Fe, which is run out of Santa Fe Community College. The literacy programs provide free tutoring to those who need it. The coalition is funded by the New Mexico Department of Cultural Affairs.

"We're like the United Way for literacy programs," said Virginia J. Pulver, the coalition's recruitment consultant. "Some of our programs are in little, independent buildings, some are community-based, some are in colleges. There are just a wide variety of programs, and the number of people who get served around the state is quite large."

Keeping secrets

Prior to coming to the New Mexico Coalition for Literacy, Pulver and her husband were stationed in Ukraine through the Peace Corps. She didn't know the German language.

"It's a totally different alphabet and I couldn't read these signs," Pulver said as she held up a series of photographs of common signs. "These are basic signs. I would take photos and go home and figure out what they said."

Pulver learned how to speak a little German, but not to read and write it.

"I felt in jeopardy sometimes when I was out alone," Pulver said. "If somebody finds out you can't read or write, they try to cheat you."

Because of that experience, she said she "had a pretty clear feeling of what it's like to be an adult who can't read or write."

When Pulver goes to the grocery store, oftentimes people will ask her to read a label or sign for them, saying they've forgotten their glasses. She didn't really think anything of this until she began working with the coalition. She found out that scenario often is a coping mechanism for somebody who can't read.

"Almost half the adults in New Mexico can't read and write in their own native language above a fifth-grade level and sixth-grade level," Pulver said. "The fact is they can't read and write well enough to do things like get a driver's license, read their medicine labels. They can't read to their kids and can't read notes coming home from teachers."

Pulver said many of those who can't read and write have "tremendous" ways of coping — such as memorization.

She worked with a student who retired from the National Guard and had memorized all his regulations.

"He is an intelligent man, but he fell between the cracks for some reason or another," Pulver said.

According to Heunermund, about 46 percent of adults in New Mexico are not able to read or write. In Santa Fe County, 34 percent of people are not able to read. In San Miguel County, 59 percent of people are unable to read and write and in Rio Arriba County, that number jumps to 61 percent.

"People don't realize that there are so many people in this state that are basically keeping this little secret," Pulver said.

Through the darkness

One of the best things about seeking help from one of the New Mexico Coalition for Literacy's programs is privacy, Griego said.

"When you walk into organizations like ReadWest, they don't ask you to fill out paperwork," Griego said. "It's private."

Representatives will pair students with a volunteer tutor based on personalities and interests, Griego said, for one-on-one tutoring.

"I used to be a musician when I was younger and my tutor, (the late) Gordon Suits, was a piano player," Griego said. "That automatically gave us something in common."

Another plus, Griego said, is that if a tutor and student don't get along, they can each find different people to work with.

"That's what makes the programs work," Griego said. "The biggest thing is privacy. It's always in your hands when you decide you want to come out."

The hardest part, he said, is "The initial shame of saying, 'I have a lot of trouble.' That's where these programs step right in."

Griego loves to share his story and his book, which is even used in the curriculum of two Albuquerque charter schools. His purpose is to help others, he said.

"I hated that dark life I led," Griego said. "I believe God wanted me to travel through that darkness so I

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could understand and find the light and start helping other people who are where I used to be. It's actually an honor."

Ripple effect

The New Mexico Coalition for Literacy said that literacy is a smart investment.

Pulver said, "Think about the increase in earning power when a person can read — \$8.5 million is what our students are bringing to the economy of New Mexico by improving their skills. If people could just raise those (literacy) skills, they could earn \$1 more an hour."

Heunermund said education is a hot topic with the gubernatorial candidates right now, and she wants to know what each plans to do for adult literacy.

"I want to issue a call to action, if I may, and ask them what they're doing and encourage them to contact me and let's talk," Heunermund said. She said that improving adult literacy will improve child literacy as well. If an adult is not able to read, that results in less books in the home — which is the first site of learning to read for many proficient readers, Heunermund said.

"Usually people take for granted the literacy issues because it's like breathing, walking and talking," Heunermund said. "People still don't know that illiteracy is an issue."

Contact Ana Maria Trujillo at 986-3084 or atrujillo@sfnewmexican.com.

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 **Virginia J. Pulver** 1 day ago

Nice article, BUT I was in Ukraine (with Peace Corps) speaking RUSSIAN (NOT German)! I am able to deal with Gemand na dSpanish, but the Cyrillic alphabet and written Russian -> that's another story! Hope to see you all at the NMCL Celebration of Literacy on September 8th! If YOU know someone who can't read or write, all 800.233.7587 and find out about free, one-to-one, confidential tutoring for adults!

"Ginn"
VJ Pulver
In Sunny Santa Fe

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