

Literacy Volunteers of Washington County: 40th Anniversary

Literacy Volunteers of Washington County (LVWC) began as a Westerly Public Library (WPL) literacy outreach program in 1982. Three years later, LVWC was certified as an affiliate of the WPL and a part-time coordinator, Joyce M. LeVasseur, was hired. The first newsletter was released on July 16, 1987, and since then has been released on a bi-annual basis at a minimum. By 1988, LVWC had developed its own bylaws, created a Board of Directors, and become incorporated; that same year, the WPL offered the use of its Tower Room for all LVWC events.

In 1990, LVWC entered the digital age by adding Mac computers and software, and the organization received special recognition from President George Bush and Mrs. Bush. In 1991, LVWC achieved 501(c)3 nonprofit status. Two years later, a computer lab was established, along with the Margaret Moore Driscoll Memorial Fund. By 1998, LVWC had two staff members (Executive Director and Program Associate), an intern from the naval sub base, 17 board members, and an advisory council. In 2004, LVWC received accreditation from ProLiteracy America, and added new software to help citizenship prepare for the the citizenship exam. Three years later, the organization celebrated 25 years of its existence, followed by an anniversary endowment in honor of late member Joyce Ahern. In 2009, LVWC relocated from the WPL to Tower Street School. In the last couple of years, the organization has participated in Rhode Island NPR's "Mosaic" podcast series and partnered with Art Connection Rhode Island. LVWC published Lessons on Rights and Responsibilities in 1992 and the Manual for Assessment and Evaluation of Adult Learners in 1995, and co-published the Community Resources Guide in 1996.

LVWC currently has four staff members and 50 active tutors, who help an average of 75 students per year. The organization services both Washington County, RI — Charlestown, Hopkinton, Richmond, South Kingstown, and Westerly — and New London County, CT — Mystic, North Stonington, Pawcatuck, and Stonington. Common learner goals include applying for and taking a driver's license test, applying for jobs and/or improving job skills, applying for U.S. citizenship, learning and improving reading and writing, and registering to vote.

The LVWC has had six executive directors throughout its history, beginning with Anne Preuss, then Mary Lou Gentz, Ruth Tureckova, Jennifer Coduri Ross, Antoinette "Toni" Lautieri, and, finally, the current Executive Director, Mary Carol Kendzia. There have been 10 board presidents, commencing with Richard J. Benoit, then Margaret Richards, D'Ann Sullivan, Attorney Frederick C. ("Fritz") Eckel, Jr., Peter W. West, Jane B. Gencarelli, Susan M. Dumouchel, Howard B. Thorp, Ramon Garcia, and, finally, the current President, Robin E. Springborn.

LVWCA's most recent programs have included assistance with studying and preparing for a U.S. Citizenship test; basic math skills; help with job applications, interview preparation, and career advancement; learning to read, write, and speak English via conversation classes, tutoring, and online support and earning; literacy programs for native English speakers; and various test prep assistance.

LVWC's fundraising events mainly consist of the Joyce S. Ahern Summer Speaker Series (since 2012), Lace up for Literacy (since 2020), and Links for Literacy at the Weekapaug Golf Club. Over the years, LVWC has received numerous grants, from 25+ organizations as varied as the Electric Boat Employees' Community Service and the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE), Division of Library Services. The grant amounts have ranged from \$600 to more than \$15,000, and LVWC has also been fortunate to receive a plethora of donations from generous individuals and from events, which the organization have held since its inception.

LVWC has partnered with local organizations The Granite Theatre and The Colonial Theater to provide theater benefit events, and also participated in Community Fund Drives and Tin Cup Days in conjunction with the WPL. Other benefits over the years have included a house tour in Mystic, breakfast at The Elks Club, concerts, and wine tastings and buffets at The Cooked Goose.

LVWC attended numerous Literacy Volunteers of America (LVA) events, including for its 25th anniversary in 1987 and in 1993, where the founders of LVWC were honored. Representatives from LVWC often attended LVA Rhode Island's yearly conference as well. In 1990, LVWC held a raffle in which participants could enter to win a free cruise, and in 1996, a group went to New York City via bus to visit the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In addition, LVWC was given a tour of The Westerly on Inauguration Day in 2005; that same year, participants took a tour of the Rhode Island State Capitol. LVWC's annual meetings often ended up also being picnics or potlucks, as well as award ceremonies. And, since 2006, LVWC has celebrated the Asian New Year in a winter social format.

As an integral member of the community, LVWC has engaged in such activities as film screenings, lectures and conferences, new software demonstrations, open houses, encouraging people to register to vote, family readings, job training programs, and free eye exams sponsored by Vision USA. At the onset of the pandemic and in the time since, LVWC has operated virtual programs, such as conversation classes, with a few in-person events.

Participants have represented a number of different countries, including Afghanistan, Argentina, Brazil, China, Colombia, Costa Rica, Czechoslovakia, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Peru, Puerto Rico, Romania, South Korea, Spain, and Thailand.

Workshops and programs have included basic reading workshops, citizenship classes, ESL workshops, fall workshops on the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, intergenerational literacy workshops through Westerly Public Schools, job clinics for learners, LVA tutor roundtables, and year-end assessments.

Those interested in helping LVWC can donate to the organization or volunteer by providing administrative help, fundraising, tutoring, etc. Literacy Volunteers of Washington County would like to thank its partners/friends, which include Houses 4 Good, Island Free Library Block Island, Savoy Bookshop & Cafe, Tri-County Community Action Agency, URI Office of International Students and Scholars, Westerly Education Center, Westerly Land Trust, and Westerly Library & Wilcox Park.

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