

Literacy Council of Bowie and Miller Counties

Annual Report

2023

Beyond Books

Functional literacy education is helping students like Logan Garza learn to care for themselves and their families.



One of our former students, Natasha, is a single mother with small children at home. Because she did not have transportation or child care, she could not come into our office for regular tutoring sessions. That never stopped her, and she found a way to work remotely and stay on top of her assignments. She pushed so hard that one month she progressed through three levels of curriculum. We were so impressed and so proud of her! Our team wanted to recognize her hard work, so we asked her to make transportation arrangements when she could and come in for a special presentation. We told her to bring her children with her.

We designed and printed three certificates for her on regular copy paper in our office—one for each level she had advanced through. They were not framed, and I am not even sure we used colored ink for them. Looking back, it was a gesture that was so simple for us, but it made a profound impact on her life. When she arrived, we presented them to her in front of an audience of Literacy Council staff, other students, and her babies. She accepted the awards and said, “I have never gotten a certificate in my life. I wish my dad were still alive to see this.” She cried (actually, we all cried), and we realized immediately that it was important that we publicly praise our students as often as we can.

For this reason, we started dedicating the last Thursday of each month to student celebrations. On this day, there are no assessments and no lessons: just time to build relationships, highlight progress, and enjoy our Literacy Council family. Our team plans a Lunch and Learn potluck where we even bring out fancy champagne flutes and fill them with sparkling apple cider to toast our students’ success and the success we know they will find in the future. It’s my favorite day of the month.

Our office culture is built around best practices for student achievement, and for us, these luncheons are more than just a fun time of fellowship; they are an important part of the community we are trying to build among men and women like Natasha who often do not always have a positive support system.

Just as we praise our students, we also honor the incredible community we have that supports our important organization. While you may not be here everyday to provide hands-on work, we consider you to be a valuable part of the Literacy Council team. We could not lift up people like Natasha or the other students you will read about in this report without the financial support of donors and grant makers like you. It is not Thursday, but today I am raising my champagne flute of apple cider to you! Here’s to our success and the success I know we will find as we continue our work in the future. Together, we make a difference.

Cheers!



Dr. Jenny McCormack Walker,
Executive Director



2022-23

Board of Directors

Dr. Brian Matthews
Board Chair

Vashil Fernandez
Vice Chair

Kerry Brown
Treasurer

Jennifer Harland
Secretary

Diane Engelkes
Board Member

Fred Markham
Board Member

Traci Pitman
Board Member

Christi Shedlock
Board Member

Dr. Kevin Williams
Board Member

Mission

Our mission is to use functional literacy education to empower learners to achieve academic success, develop life skills, and improve workforce competencies in the Texarkana region.

Vision

Our vision is to eliminate generational poverty through education.

Founded in 1986 in the Texarkana Public Library, the Literacy Council of Bowie and Miller Counties is a 501(c)3 non-profit Organization.



According to the National Center for Education Statistics—a division of the U. S. Department of Education—about a quarter of our adult population (23 percent in Bowie County and 25 percent in Miller County) functions at or below Level 1 for literacy. Combined, those percentages add up to more than 23,000 people in our immediate service area. Those at the upper end of Level 1 can only read and understand short texts of familiar vocabulary (think 1st grade). Those at the lower end of Level 1 struggle to complete simple forms (think job applications). Many of these 23,000 men and women have children, and without intervention, the cycle will only continue. However, the Literacy Council of Bowie and Miller Counties is working to turn this problem into a solution that benefits us all. Through our functional literacy education program, we are helping men and women find success so they can meet local workforce needs, end generational cycles of poverty, and become productive members of the community we all call home.

Major Donors

Make major work possible

\$25,000 and above



SONJA AND BOB
HUBBARD



PATTERSON ★ TROIKE
F O U N D A T I O N



T.L.L. TEMPLE FOUNDATION
EST 1962
BUILDING A THRIVING DEEP EAST TEXAS

\$10,000 to \$24,999



Lauren
Layne

tsahc
Texas State Affordable
Housing Corporation

\$5,000 to \$9,999



 **DELTA DENTAL®**





The 100 Families team recently traveled to the Winthrop Rockefeller Institute for case manager training with Restore Hope Arkansas, the founding organization of the 100 Families Initiative. The Institute is located in Morrilton, Arkansas on Mt. Petit Jean. Pictured left to right are Cami Brown, Chris Howell, Kristina Rivas-Jones, and Linda Taylor. Not pictured is Candi Potts.

100 Families Alliance grows, expands to become its own non-profit organization

The 100 Families Alliance is a network of existing non-profits, government agencies, faith-based organizations, and other community partners working collaboratively to help men and women find stability and move “from crisis to career.” The initiative was founded by Restore Hope Arkansas, an organization birthed from a summit planned by former Arkansas Governor Asa Hutchinson. Governor Hutchinson saw a need to address root causes for the dramatic increase in people going into incarceration (and, subsequently, children going into foster care). The initiative focuses on 13 areas of concern and provides a holistic, wrap-around approach to helping men and women get on their feet. After seeing success in four other Arkansas counties, the Literacy Council worked to bring 100 Families to Texarkana.

Since its 2022 launch, we have served 120 Texarkana families, directly impacting the lives of more than 300 school aged children. To put that into perspective, an entire graduating class of students from one of our local high schools is roughly 300 students. We know that the 100 Families initiative in Texarkana will positively impact generations to come.

Although 100 Families belongs to all of Texarkana, the Literacy Council has served as the initiative’s backbone agency since coming to Texarkana. However, with a diverse set of offerings under the 100 Families umbrella (housing, child care, transportation, etc.), seeking funding for some of those needs just did not make sense under the scope of our work at the Literacy Council.

For this reason, 100 Families has moved operations under a new Texarkana-based non-profit organization, Ground Floor Collective. Kristina Rivas-Jones has served as Texarkana’s 100 Families Coordinator since the beginning, and she will continue her 100 Families work as the Executive Director of this new organization. Ground Floor Collective will continue to operate largely out of the Literacy Council office and will work to support the Literacy Council students working toward academic, language, workforce, and life skills.



it all fits TOGETHER

Our programs are designed to align and connect with the needs of both adult learners and the greater Texarkana community



We believe that it is important that our programming options align and connect to best support both our adult learners and community needs. To accomplish this, we operate under a broad definition of literacy—functional literacy—that includes a holistic approach to education that provides all of the knowledge and skills that a person needs in order to function successfully in today's society. We realize that our students often have challenges that reach beyond educational needs, so we also address barriers to success to help them get and stay on track. Our functional literacy programming options target four areas: adult basic education, language learning, workforce skills, and life lessons.

Addressing Barriers to Success

There is a correlation between low education levels and poverty, and poverty correlates to many other challenging issues. For this reason, we work with the 100 Families Alliance in Texarkana to provide wrap-around support through a collaborative case management system that harnesses the power of existing community resources. Through 100 Families, our adult learners get help in areas like housing, food insecurity, and other needs that are not education-related, but often impact a person's ability to be successful in our programs. Additionally, we host meetings for the New Beginnings chapter of Narcotics Anonymous meetings each Friday at noon. Many of our students are working hard to get and stay sober, and our partnership with NA provides this opportunity.

Adult Basic Education

Our adult basic education program helps students set and reach academic achievement. Whether students need to improve reading or math skills, earn a GED, or explore college options at one of our local institutions of higher education, our team is ready to meet them where they are and help them move forward. Every student takes an initial TABE assessment so that we can track and record measurable progress. Depending on TABE results, we choose the appropriate curriculum and get students started on a path that leads them to the academic goals they set for themselves.

Language Learning

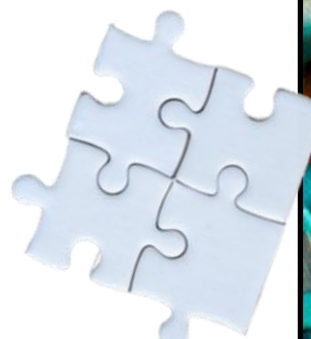
We have a growing population of men and women in our service area whose first language is not English. We know it is important to teach the fundamental language skills they need in order for them to communicate effectively as employees, consumers, and parents in our community. Non-native speakers are assessed with the TABE Clas-E test to assess their skills so our team can set and measure progress toward their language learning goals. Additionally, our Language Learning program offers Spanish lessons for English speakers who want to learn to better communicate with the Spanish-speaking population.

Workforce Skills

We assist students with resumes, cover letters, interview skills, and online job applications. We also work in partnership with the Texarkana Chamber of Commerce as we become an ACT Work Ready Community by offering preparation for the National Career Readiness Certification (NCRC) exam. The NCRC is recognized by several local employers for good jobs that help our students earn a living wage to better provide for themselves and their families. We also partner with local employers to connect our students with hiring events and job fairs.

Life Lessons

We often take for granted small life lessons that are essential for everyday living. Our Life Lessons program includes a wide variety of content including health and wellness, computer skills, and family literacy. We offer a robust financial literacy program that includes education on household budgeting, saving for home ownership, and we help prepare taxes through the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program in partnership with the IRS. Through our Life Lessons program, our adult learners can also learn how to navigate the public transportation system in Texarkana and any number of other challenges unique to our area. Each student's plan is tailored to their individual needs and learning outcomes.



Beyond Books



Functional literacy education helps students learn the skills they need to better provide for themselves and their families

Logan Garza, 21, struggled with substance use beginning at 12-years-old and was homeless as a teen. Her drug addiction ultimately led the Bonham, Texas native to legal trouble, and only three weeks into a sentence at the Fannin County jail, she found out she was pregnant. The judge transferred her to the Bowie County Women's Center, and it was there that she decided she could build a new life for herself and the baby she was expecting. She earned a GED and had dreams of attending college. In order to make those dreams a reality, she knew she could not return to life in her hometown. However, without a support system in Texarkana, she needed help learning to navigate through challenges like finding housing, childcare, and work. It was then that Logan was introduced to the Literacy Council of Bowie and Miller Counties and the 100 Families Alliance.

*Logan Garza
and her baby,
Illianna*

The Literacy Council's adult basic education program teaches functional literacy, a broad definition of literacy that extends beyond academic achievement to educate learners in a holistic way. Functional literacy encompasses all of the knowledge and skills a person needs in order to live

successfully in today's society. The 100 Families Alliance, an initiative brought to Texarkana by the Literacy Council, harnesses the power of existing community resources in order to help families find stability so they can move from crisis to career.

With the help of this wrap-around support, Logan learned the skills she needed to thrive. She has remained on track with her recovery, and she has worked hard to provide a safe, stable, and loving home for her daughter. In less than a year, Logan has met several of her personal goals, including enrolling in college. She works at the Literacy Council as a peer mentor, and she was the recipient of the second Against All Odds award from the 100 Families Alliance given to a person who is able to persevere through the most challenging situations.

Literacy Texas, a statewide organization that supports adult learning, awarded Logan with the 2023 Student Achievement Award for Adult Basic Education for her hard work and success. She accepted the award Aug. 2 in College Station at the Literacy Texas annual convention, making her the first Texarkana student to receive this award.

Logan is not the only one of our adult learners who has made remarkable strides because of our innovative approach to education. Check out profiles of three other students — Cameron Villa, Candi Lee, and Jennifer McLean — on the next page.

Fun Fact

The Literacy Council helped Logan connect to Texarkana College's Educational Opportunities Center, and through the EOC, she was awarded one of six national scholarships. She plans to work as a counselor.





Cameron Villa

Cameron began working with the Literacy Council after he was referred to us from the Miller County Drug Court. He had been in some trouble, but Judge Carlton Jones knew Cameron could get on track if he just had a little guidance. He worked with our life skills coordinator, Chris Howell, and made a personalized plan for success. Cameron's goals included getting forklift certified, enrolling in classes at Texarkana College, and getting his first apartment. We are proud to say that Cameron has met (and surpassed) all of those goals through our functional literacy program. We cannot wait to see what the future holds for him!

Candi Lee

This mother of four was committed to setting a good example for her school-aged children, and that's exactly what she did. Candi worked with our team for a year to prepare for the GED test. She faced several challenges along the way, but she never let it stop her. She worked with our 100 Families team to find community resources that could help fill the gaps so she could remain focused on her goals. She persevered, and passed all parts of her test with flying colors. The very next day, she enrolled at Texarkana College and began working on her next goal: going to nursing school. Earning her GED and attending college impacted more than just her life. She said that she and her children now have conversations about college and make plans for their future. One of the exciting things about our work is positive generational impact we see!



Jennifer McLean

Jennifer has been on our roster for three years, and we are so proud of the success she has found at the Literacy Council. Her individualized education plan is well rounded and includes instruction in academic, workforce, and life skills. Jennifer is autistic, and our team helps her continue learning new things every day. With our help, Jennifer has improved her reading and math skills, learned about healthy living practices, and she has mastered skills required for safe independent living. She not only learns with us, but she also volunteers her time helping the Literacy Council plan and promote our monthly Lunch and Learn events.

Money Matters

Program helps adult learners manage finances

Our ultimate goal for the adult learners we serve is to help them gain the education and workforce skills they need in order to earn a living wage that best provides for themselves and their families. However, we know that many of the men and women we serve have never learned appropriate money management skills. Once we help them secure employment, we want them to be equipped with the knowledge they need in order to make responsible decisions with their money.

For this reason, our financial literacy program is one of the most important that we offer at the Literacy Council. Our options allow students to learn about household budgeting, setting financial goals, and navigating financial crisis situations like car repossession and bankruptcy. We have been fortunate to

connect with several local financial institutions to be sure the students in our financial literacy program receive the best and most current information from experts in the community. Red River Credit Union, Cadence Bank, and Regions Bank have been wonderfully supportive of our efforts and have volunteered their time in making sure our adult learners have the best solutions for their needs.

In addition to our local partners, our financial literacy program includes a partnership with the Internal Revenue Service to provide free tax preparation services through the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program. Each year, our VITA program has grown, and for the 2022 tax season we successfully processed 214 returns for qualified individuals. To qualify for the VITA program, a person has to have a household income of less than \$60,000, be disabled, have limited English proficiency, or

be over the age of 60.

Debbie Watson serves as the VITA Program Coordinator for the Literacy Council, and she loves the way VITA supports our financial literacy program and our students.

"By helping people file their taxes through our VITA program, we are able to take that burden off of our students' shoulders and save them hundreds of dollars." We will begin processing tax returns for the current year in January.

To volunteer as a tax preparer for the upcoming season, contact Debbie at 903-255-7733 and schedule a time for training and certification.

By helping people file their taxes through our VITA program, we are able to take the burden off of our students' shoulders and save them hundreds of dollars

*Debbie Watson,
VITA Program Coordinator*

VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT: Mac Carrell



Assistant Vice President & Branch Manager



Over the past year, Mac Carrell has volunteered many hours of his time at the Literacy Council to help our adult learners manage their money. He has presented financial literacy workshops at our monthly Lunch and Learn meetings, and he has met with our students for one-on-one, individual help both in our office and at the Ashdown, Arkansas branch. Mac has gone above and beyond to serve our organization, and we are grateful to him and to Regions Bank for their support!



2022-23

Literacy Council Team

Dr. Jenny McCormack Walker
Executive Director

Kristina Rivas-Jones
100 Families County Coordinator

Cami Brown
*100 Students Case Manager,
Texarkana College*

Beth Carlton
AmeriCorps Member—Workforce

James Clinton
AmeriCorps Member—GED

Jackie Grissom
Peer Mentor

Jackie Hudson
Academic Coordinator, Fall

Patsy LaRue
Office Manager

Brenda Pharr
*100 Families Case Manager,
Bowie County*

Kris Pinkston
AARP — Compliance

Candi Potts
*100 Families Case Manager,
Miller County*

Nere Soto-Garcia
*Academic Coordinator, Spring
Language Learning Coordinator*

Linda Taylor
*100 Families Case Manager
Bowie County*

Debbie Watson
AARP — Data Manager

Kyndall Eudy
Chris Howell
Elena McClory
Emily McMillan
Paula Moss
Mya Riles
Texas A&M Interns

Haley Brewer
Patti Huckabee
Instructional Volunteers

Friends we'll miss

Our team functions as a close-knit family, and we will miss two of our friends who moved on to new assignments this year.

First, **Kris Pinkston** joined our team as part of the AARP Workforce training program and won our hearts. She helped with compliance for the IRS VITA program and data management. When the native Californian found herself unfamiliar with some of our common southern traditions, our team went to work expanding the Literacy Council curriculum to include fundamental lessons in southern slang and all things chicken fried.

Just when we thought we had baptized her in enough gravy, she decided to move back to the sunny beaches of southern California to be closer to her family. Before she left, we surprised Kris with a going away party where we all brought her fun socks, which are her favorite clothing items. We sure miss her!

Also, one of our case managers, **Brenda Pharr**, passed away last spring after a brief battle with pancreatic cancer. Brenda, who worked with the Literacy Council for

over a year, was the heart of our office. She began her work with us as a tutor and later became our first case manager for the 100 Families Alliance. It was fitting that her last day to work was the 1-year celebration of that initiative. She put her whole heart into building a strong foundation for our new venture.

Nothing made Brenda more happy than to see her clients find success, and her gentle kindness and sweet spirit are missed every single day by those who knew her.



Save the Date

EAST TEXAS GIVING DAY



April 30, 2024

Learn more at
easttexasgivingday.org

30TH ANNUAL

EST

1994



SPELLING BEE

LITERACY COUNCIL OF
BOWIE AND MILLER
COUNTIES

April 13, 2024

SILVERMOON ON BROAD

BOOKS+bagels

Join the Literacy Council as we dedicate two

Little Free Libraries

in honor of the Texarkana Solarbration.

9 a.m. | April 8, 2024

