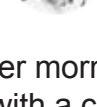




## Sharing the power of reading

by Kathy Coffey



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On a frigid winter morning Doug hopped on a bus to a storefront help center, despairing that he'd lost his job with a cleaning service for not understanding printed signs and written warnings.

And when Doug asked if the bus went where he wanted to go, the driver snapped: "Can't you read the marquee?"

Many on their first visit to that storefront look uncertain and ashamed. Doug was the very portrait of insecurity.

Chin buried in an old army coat, hat covering his eyes, Doug hid his face as he admitted, "I can't read."

Fortunately, he connected with Sr. Barbara Jean Backs, who had been a teacher for more than 50 years. Her presence is calming; no one could resist her smile. They made flashcards together, of signs like "Cross here," "Danger," "Men/Women."

Seeing the practicality, Doug returned again and again.

Doug is one of more than 500 adults who have been served at the Brunner Literacy Center since it opened in July 2011 in Trotwood, an area in greater Dayton of high unemployment, crime and poverty and where businesses that are dying.

Welcoming and no-nonsense at the same time, the center offers critical services in an area of above-average illiteracy rates and below-average high school graduation rates.

Brunner is a busy place. There are more cars on its parking lot than anywhere else in town; in an adjacent thrift store, clients practice reading labels and prices.

Inside, the center is abuzz. At 10 different tables, tutors and clients are deeply engaged, talking intently, oblivious to visitors.

Non-readers and English learners are paired with volunteers, including nearly two dozen teachers, mostly in their 80s, from the Sisters of the Precious Blood convent across the street. The women help clients work toward goals they set for themselves, from reading a simple book to getting a high school equivalency diploma.

The center, in fact, was founded by two Precious Blood sisters, Maryann Bremke and Helen Weber, and named after Maria Anna Brunner, their community's founder. Stuck in a car together for a rainy, five-hour drive in 2010, Bremke and Weber envisioned a literacy program tailored to Trotwood and planned key components: They would need a location, clients, volunteers and money. It should be a welcoming place, with all services free. And it should not look like a school – too many people have experienced failure there.

With an extensive background in school administration, Weber could organize the legal, financial and supervisory functions. Bremke would steer curriculum, and, with her creative imagination unleashed, decorate.

Many needs were met surprisingly fast. An appliance store closed and half the space was given to the literacy center. It soon became a large, friendly environment with comfortable couches, work tables and overflowing book shelves. When another literacy center downtown closed for lack of funds, Bremke arrived with a truck and collected their donated equipment.

Poor public schools and an influx of under-educated people moving into the neighborhood contribute to the need for literacy and high school programs. But clients represent a broader spectrum.

A young man with Down's Syndrome worked to read a story about St. Nicholas to schoolchildren. Five siblings homeschooled in South Carolina earned their high school equivalency diplomas. A refugee who escaped Eritrea learned English and, with help from the sisters, got a job and is saving up to bring his wife and children to the U.S.

Sr. Ruth Ann Meyer, a former math professor and grant writer for the University of Western Michigan, tells a story about the two drinking buddies who had found Jesus together. When one finished high school, the other started to wonder if he could do the same. Meyer, his tutor, laughed, "Well, we might have to repair a few brain cells – but of course you can!"

For each client a thick binder holds consistent, professional evaluations, checked every 30 sessions. It contains test scores from initial assessments and the client's statement of goals, which tutors measure for progress. No one is ever turned away: The movement from hopelessness to some sense of hope shows more clearly in faces than in any charts or statistics.

And the binders can't quite contain the delight of Sr. Jeannine Kloeker as she describes the time a client in her 20s, who arrived not knowing the alphabet, started reading sentences.

The average client stays six months, but many become attached to the one-on-one attention from their tutors, demonstrating how a personal relationship is essential to any true education. Would bonds like these have made a difference for clients who slipped through school without basic reading skills?

"It's healthy for the sisters," Bremke stressed. "It directs table conversation away from aches and pains to a more positive topic. They feel needed, and they get more than they give."

A typical tutoring session might not include personal conversation, since many clients come from distressing home situations and financial problems they don't want to discuss.

"For 150 clients there are 150 stories," Bremke explained. "We listen to whatever they want to share, and don't probe. They just want to learn." So a sister might begin with, "Did your grandparents like that book you read them?"

The nuns shrewdly avoid stalling techniques. When a client asked one sister, "Did you wear a habit? Tell me about that," she responded, "we're here for math!" Experienced teachers know how to shift tactics, and delight in a non-reader progressing to a third-grade reading level.

"That keeps you going!" explained Sr. Rose Margaret Broerman, who interviews new clients. "They're open and honest about their backgrounds, and I often say, 'Thank God I was so blessed. I never would've survived the conditions they've endured.' I keep telling my family about their progress, I'm so excited. Guess that's the teacher in me coming out."

On the advice of many, the co-founders decided not to take state or federal funds, which would require additional staff to manage. But private foundation grants, especially from the Precious Blood community, have generously financed the \$270,000 annual budget.

Help comes from several directions. A 5k run, projected to earn \$3,000, brought in \$6,000. A parish that donated use of the building also pays for utilities. Local businesses, corporations and private individuals have generated substantial sums.

The public library donates 35 to 40 books a month. "Take it home; read it to your family!" tutors encourage, first making sure a client has mastered the level required.

To create a board of directors Weber and Bremke went right to the top. They invited Precious Blood sisters, judges, a television news anchor, the heads of the urban league and job center, an Upward Bound director, a hospital administrator, the mayor of Trotwood, a city commissioner, significant tutors, and key members of the clergy. To their surprise and delight, 18 agreed to serve.

A simple conclusion drives Bremke's expectations – and long days: "Our clients are non-readers, not non-thinkers."

Remember Doug, the man who couldn't read signs and warnings?

He came so faithfully for tutoring that the Brunner staff gave him a bus pass, assistance reserved for the really needy. He was homeless, so the sisters helped him get a room in a shelter.

After nine months, he got a job and his own apartment.

Brunner co-founder Sr. Helen Weber praised Doug's tutor, Sr. Barbara Jean Benks. "B.J. cares. It's as simple as that. He learned from her that he was worth something and could do it. She kept affirming him, telling him how well he was doing."

[Kathy Coffey is the author of several books about prayer, as well as catechetical resources and numerous articles in Catholic periodicals including *National Catholic Reporter*. She gives national workshops, retreats and conference speeches and taught for 15 years at the University of Colorado, Denver, and at Regis Jesuit University. Her website is <http://kathyjcoffey.wordpress.com/>.]

### By the numbers: Brunner Literacy Center

**Location:** An area of 11,000 households in greater Dayton in which 4,000 people over 18 do not have a high school diploma.

**Clients Served:** More than 500 adults.

**Current clients:** 150 active, 133 inactive; 72 reached their goal.

### Active clients:

35 percent working toward a GED

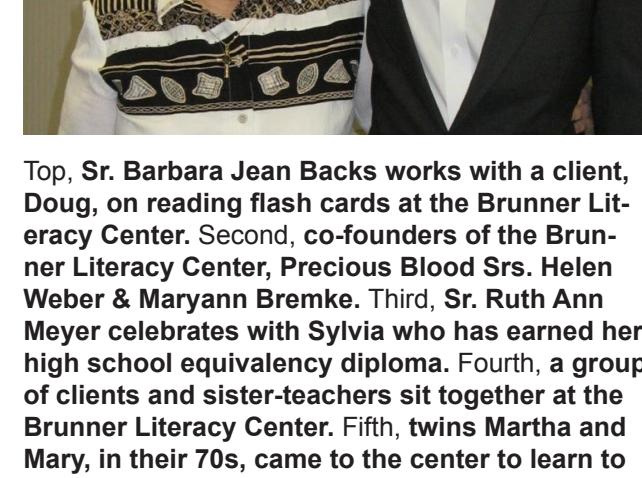
37 percent learning to read or have basic educational needs

11 percent English learners

7 percent want to improve reading comprehension

5 percent working on computer skills

5 percent working to attend college, nursing school



Top, Sr. Barbara Jean Backs works with a client, Doug, on reading flash cards at the Brunner Literacy Center. Second, co-founders of the Brunner Literacy Center, Precious Blood Srs. Helen Weber & Maryann Bremke. Third, Sr. Ruth Ann Meyer celebrates with Sylvia who has earned her high school equivalency diploma. Fourth, a group of clients and sister-teachers sit together at the Brunner Literacy Center. Fifth, twins Martha and Mary, in their 70s, came to the center to learn to read. Now up to a third grade level, they were delighted to be able to read the Meals on Wheels flyer that told there was no Labor Day delivery. Now they're writing stories about their childhood as sharecroppers in Mississippi. Bottom, Sr. Barbara Jean Backs gets a surprise visit from a more successful Doug, her longtime student at Brunner. (photos by Kathy Coffey)