

Sisters of the Precious Blood fight illiteracy Brunner Literacy Center fills a need.

LIFESTYLES By Pamela Dillon - Contributing Writer

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When Sister Maria Anna Brunner was widowed with six children in 1834, she baked extra loaves of bread to distribute to the needy on her way to Mass in Switzerland. Her house turned into a food pantry. Many followed her example, and the Sisters of the Precious Blood was founded, expanding to Chile, Guatemala and the United States.

The Sisters of the Precious Blood in Dayton are also known for their generosity, but in another way. They give their time and talents to help the illiterate. When the Rev. William O'Donnell of the Dayton Precious Blood Parish offered the use of an empty building, the Brunner Literacy Center was opened in July of 2011.

"Two and a half years ago Sister Helen Weber and I realized a crying need for literacy in this area. We found out that 30 percent of the general population was illiterate. Many people don't know that," said BLC co-founder Sr. Maryann Bremke. "As longtime educators, we thought we could help."

They planted that seed by putting fliers out in Dayton-area stores and businesses. The fliers advertised help for those 21 and older who needed their GED.

"What we did was offer help with math, English and reading," Bremke said. "We kept getting more and more calls, and the program grew exponentially."

From those first few clients the program has grown to a total of 135 volunteer tutors assisting 160 adults. Twenty-two of those volunteers are Sisters of the Precious Blood, ranging in age from 65 to 93.

"Without the sisters, there would be no program," said BLC executive director Jackie Mayer. "It is their mission to serve the underserved."

The volunteers work anywhere from two to six hours per week. There was a big push last year to intensify efforts for GED training, since new rules would make it more difficult to pass the test in 2014.

"At the end of December, 22 of our clients passed the GED test. We have about a 30 percent success rate," said Bremke. "Some will get their GED, some will not. But we can make their lives better and help them learn basic skills, like how to use a computer."

Some clients who come to the Brunner Center (4825 Salem Ave.) are educationally challenged and have learning disabilities. About 10 percent of the clients come to the center as a requirement for probation. Approximately 15 percent need to learn English as their second language.

"Most of the immigrants are from Africa and some are from Yemen," said Bremke. "We reach out to the poor so they can get a basic education. It's a real need and a real service to the community."

Many of those who work and volunteer at the BLC



Sisters Helen Weber (left) and Maryann Bremke are co-founders of the Brunner Literacy Center. CONTRIBUTED

are not in the SPB order, of course. Program manager Barbara Maloney is one of those people.

"I started in July of 2012 as a volunteer tutor at the end of a full day of teaching," said Maloney, now retired. "Coming to the center re-energized me. They asked me to be an administrator, and I can see myself doing this for a long time."

Maloney has worked with both tutors and clients, and has seen how the center has changed the lives for all involved.

"As I have studied at the Brunner Literacy Center, I have advanced my mathematical skills and knowledge," said client Ruschell Smith. "I have also grown in self-confidence and can function much more smoothly in daily life."

According to Maloney, some of the tutors have cancer, or missing limbs, or use a wheelchair. But that doesn't stop them from giving back. The volunteer work gives them the knowledge that they can still make a difference.

"It's almost an instant connection between tutor and client if I make a good match," said Maloney.

You can help

Maybe literacy and basic education tutoring is a match for your skill set. The nonprofit organization is in constant need of more tutors since new clients enroll on a daily basis. For just a few hours a week, you can change the path of someone's life.

Call the center at 937-567-9600 to find out when the next tutor orientation workshop is offered.

In addition to the work of volunteers, the organization is totally dependent upon donations. The center doesn't receive help from the state or federal government. Special recognition is given to companies and individuals for generous donations. Visit the website at www.brunnerliteracy.org for more information.