

Sisters of the Precious Blood work to promote literacy

LIFESTYLES By Beth Anspach - Contributing Writer

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Being able to read is a skill most adults in the United States take for granted. But if you think about it, illiteracy has a tremendous impact on ability to navigate day-to-day life in today's rapidly moving society.

What most people don't realize is that 50 percent of American adults are unable to read a book at an eighth-grade level and that in the state of Ohio alone, 24 percent of all adults do not have their high school diplomas.

In 2010, two sisters of the Precious Blood in north-west Dayton wanted to address the growing needs of the population living around them. As they watched retail businesses in Trotwood continue to close and poverty levels skyrocket, they looked for ways to help and Sisters Maryann Bremke and Helen Weber opened the Brunner Literacy Center in an abandoned retail space on Salem Avenue in the summer of 2011.

"The sisters of the Precious Blood have a large number in retirement," said Celine O'Neill, current executive director of the Brunner Literacy Center. "They were looking for a way to make a contribution to their community and most being retired school teachers and administrators, it seemed a perfect fit."

O'Neill came on board as executive director about a year ago, when the center had been open four years.

"It started with people coming by and seeing the sign," O'Neill said. "They would stop at the thrift store next door and would see that it was a literacy center so they would stop and ask about it."

And so the need for volunteers and tutors grew. Brunner not only had the sisters from Precious Blood tutoring but also began to bring in retired professionals and former and current teachers.

"It just mushroomed from there," O'Neill said. "We have seen almost 800 different people who have come in for tutoring and have a steady roster now of 130 tutors."

Brunner serves clients with a variety of literacy needs, from people who have no ability to read to those who know simple words and basic math. The center also serves refugees who can't speak English and want to learn conversational English and need help finding employment. They also help people prepare for GED testing.

"Our center is great for people who need a little extra help and who have not done well in a classroom setting," O'Neill said. "We have at least one tutor assigned to every client so they get that individual personal touch and we try to tailor and customize what we do for each client that comes in."

O'Neill has spent the past 16 years of her professional career working at the University of Dayton and was able to retire from that job in 2015. At that point she said she was looking for an opportunity to serve the needy in the community.

"I didn't have a specific opportunity in mind," she said. "I could retire but I had one more move in me, so I spotted the job at Brunner and I realized that literacy affects everything we do – your ability to provide for your family and teach your children – your ability to read a prescription and read street signs. It was extraordinary to me the impact the Brunner Literacy Center was having."

So much so that the center has received inquiries about opening other locations throughout Dayton and will soon have at least three in other parts of town, the first scheduled to open at the Bennett J. Cooper Criminal Justice Complex this month. Others will include two Catholic Social Services locations, one on Brown Street serving refugees recently relocating to the United States and the other on Riverview serving food pantry clients who need to learn the basics of reading, writing and math up to a sixth-grade level.

"I came at a time when we had four years of history and were trying to develop more policies and procedures," O'Neill said. "We now have so many wonderful opportunities and of course have said 'yes' to them. I'm not sure how we can do it all or pay for it all, and I think these requests will happen more frequently because literacy is foundational. Without it, everything is much harder."

For more information about the Brunner Literacy Center and upcoming events you can support including the annual 5K Walk/Run on Oct. 29, log on to brunnerliteracy.org



Top, Celine O'Neill, formerly of the University of Dayton, took over the executive director role at the Brunner Literacy Center last year. The center has been in operation for five years and has served more than 800 people over that time. Bottom, Sr. Helen Weber (left) and Sr. Maryann Bremke are Sisters of the Precious Blood and founded the Brunner Literacy Center in 2011 after recognizing a need in their community. CONTRIBUTED