



Literacy Matters

Winter 2025

Literacy is the Answer!

A common goal of our learners is to master enough English to be able to get a good job. With the help of their LVSSC tutors, a married couple from Russia have both seen that dream come true in less than a year!

Some of you will remember that Alina and Filipp spoke at the Volunteer Appreciation Lunch in April 2024. They moved to the US in September 2023 from St. Petersburg, Russia, along with their 8-year-old daughter Alesia, and now live in Englewood with Filipp's parents. Shortly after they arrived, Filipp's stepfather took them to the Venice Library to register with Peter Normann for LVSSC tutoring services.



Ray, Filipp, Alina and Carolyn

Carolyn Pearce selected Alina as her learner and they began meeting weekly in October 2023, "Alina was very motivated," recalled Carolyn. "She had a master's degree from Russia and had worked as an economist for 10 years before moving to the US."

Since Alina had a young daughter, Carolyn started bringing children's books to use in their tutoring sessions. She found them at Ollie's Bargain Outlet in Venice for as little as \$1.50 each. One learning that stood out to Carolyn from the LVSSC Tutor Training class was the TEDx Talk video "Literacy is the Answer" with speaker John Trischitti. "He said that reading is the foundation upon which all other essential skills are built, and that the greatest impact is from a child's access to books." He recommended that children have access at home to at least the same number of books as their age. So, as they finished each book, Alina took it home with instructions to read it to Alesia. Alesia now has a thirty-book children's library, ranging from Mickey Saves the Day to My Illustrated Classics Collection!

Another part of each weekly tutoring session was reviewing idioms from the book 101 American English Idioms, which was recommended in Dell's monthly Tutor Chats. And when they met for the last time in November 2024, Carolyn presented Alina with her own copy of this book!

Carolyn and Alina investigated volunteer opportunities for Alina so she could practice speaking English. Starting in February 2024, Alina began volunteering weekly at the Twig warehouse in Venice, sorting children's clothing. (Twig is a local organization serving children in foster care.) Alina enjoyed talking with the other volunteers while they worked and even used Twig's volunteer coordinator as a reference when she applied for jobs.

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A New Year of Possibilities and Growth



Dell Rubin-Smithern
President LVSSC

As we welcome the New Year, I want to take a moment to reflect on the incredible progress we've made at Literacy Volunteers of South Sarasota County. This past year has been one of transformation and positive change, and I couldn't be prouder of all that we've accomplished as a community. Thanks to the hard work and dedication of our team: Tutors, Students, Coordinators, Staff and Board Members, we have successfully navigated challenges and embraced new opportunities. One of the most exciting developments has been the addition of our Executive Director, Saara Ullery, whose leadership will be a driving force in taking our mission to new heights.

Looking ahead, the future is bright, but we need your continued support to ensure we can carry our work forward. Donations are the lifeblood of our organization, enabling us to continue providing the vital services that make such a difference in the lives of those we serve.

Every contribution, no matter the size, helps us reach new milestones and extend our impact in ways that would not be possible without you. Your generosity allows us to stay focused on our mission and make a lasting difference in the lives of those we serve.

Here's to a year filled with new possibilities, shared successes, and the ongoing power of community to make the world a better place! www.literacychangeslives.org Please Donate.

Coming Events - Save These Dates

Tuesday, March 18, 5:30, at Venice Library, 300 Nokomis Ave. S., Venice

Author Leo J. Maloney, has graciously volunteered to speak at "***Supporting Literacy Together***" to benefit Literacy Volunteers. To sign up to attend, please click on these links: [RSVP](#) and [DONATE](#) or go to our web site LiteracyChangesLives.org and scroll down to the gold area about this fundraising event. There is more about Leo Maloney and his books on page 8.

Tuesday, April 8, Noon, Shannon Staub Library, 3675 Career Lane, North Port.

This free Volunteer Appreciation Luncheon is to celebrate our volunteers and adult learners. Please plan to join us for lunch and listen to heart-warming stories from our tutors and students. The food is always delicious, and the stories told by tutors and students are the main attraction. To help plan and produce, we need volunteers. Please reach out to Serhii at 941-429-3717.

Tutors and Students: If you are willing to speak before a room of volunteers and students during the program, please email your name to Serhii at assistant.lvssc@gmail.com saying that you want to speak at the Volunteer Luncheon. You could talk about how you found Literacy Volunteers or a happy or funny story about learning English. We hope to have many speakers, and each speaker will only talk a few minutes.

Student Chats - LVSSC Students are Invited to Attend!



Attention Students:

Learning English is an exciting adventure, but it can also come with its challenges. To make the most of your studies, consider supplementing your lessons with an online English program that offers personalized support.

Peter Norrman, our Coordinator in the Venice Library, hosts and is a moderator for the ***Student Chat*** every Monday at noon. ***Student Chats*** are also available on Thursday evenings at 6:00 PM hosted by Volunteer ***Kim Pike***. This is the perfect opportunity for students to practice speaking English with other students and tutors.

Prior to each ***Student Chat***, our Tutor/Teacher ***Barbara Robidoux*** prepares the lesson for the day. Students and Tutors will discuss stories from ***News for You Online***, an online newspaper. The link is: <http://NewsForYouOnline.com> Students may use this free web site any time. The password is 737619.

There are usually 4 or 5 tutors and from 4 to 12 students in each ***Student Chat***. Students typically do all the reading. Tutors help with pronunciation and interpretations. They talk about the newspaper articles in ***News for You Online***. If a student wants to join the ***Chat*** and listen and not talk, that is okay. Listening is also a part of learning English. This is a perfect way to practice speaking English with other people.

**To register for Student Chats:
Contact Peter Norrman, Venice Coordinator
venice.literacy@gmail.com
Office: 941-861-1352**

Peter Norrman will send you a Zoom Link each week along with the topic they will be discussing.

Students can attend Student Chats even if they do not have a tutor!!

You will use the Zoom app on your cell phone or tablet or computer.

This program is designed to help students build on what they already know or what they have learned in class with a focus on reading, pronunciation, interpretation, and interactive discussions.

Student chats are not for Beginning students who do not speak or understand English.

-- Dell Rubin-Smithern

Welcome to Saara Ullery, Literacy Volunteers' Executive Director



Dear Friends and Partners,

With great excitement and gratitude, I introduce myself as the new Executive Director of Literacy Volunteers of South Sarasota County (LVSSC). It is an honor and a privilege to join this incredible organization, whose mission to transform lives through literacy aligns deeply with my professional journey and personal values.

Throughout my career, I have been passionate about building bridges across communities, fostering inclusion, and creating opportunities for individuals to thrive. Literacy is the cornerstone of these efforts as a powerful tool for unlocking potential, fostering independence, and strengthening families and communities.

As we look to the future, I envision LVSSC continuing to be a leader in local literacy efforts while also contributing to a broader national movement. By engaging with community outreach literacy programs across the country, we can share ideas, adopt innovative strategies, and strengthen our programs. At the same time, my focus will remain on serving our community right here in Sarasota County—where every learner, volunteer, and supporter plays a vital role in our collective success. Together, we can create a network of support that ensures every individual, regardless of background, has access to the resources they need to achieve their goals.

My priorities in the coming months include:

- **Enhancing Local Programs:** Increasing access to literacy services and exploring new initiatives, such as digital literacy and workforce readiness.
- **Building Connections:** Strengthening relationships with local partners, donors, and volunteers while collaborating with regional and national literacy organizations to exchange best practices.
- **Fostering a Sense of Community:** Hosting events and storytelling opportunities that celebrate the achievements of our learners and the dedication of our volunteers.
- **Amplifying Impact:** Using data and personal success stories to demonstrate how literacy transforms lives, inspires hope, and builds resilient communities.

I am deeply inspired by the commitment of our volunteers, the dedication of our staff, and the resilience of those we serve. Together, we can empower individuals to overcome barriers, achieve their dreams, and contribute to vibrant, literate communities.

Thank you for your unwavering support of LVSSC. I look forward to meeting and working with each of you as we embark on this exciting new chapter. Together, we will uplift individuals, strengthen the fabric of our community, and contribute to a national movement for literacy and equity.

With gratitude and determination,

Saara Ullery

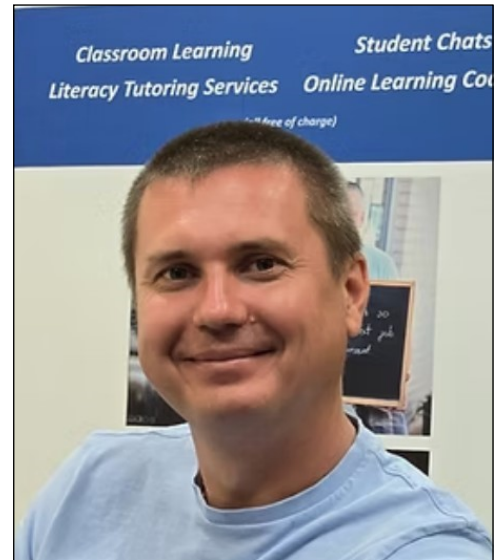
Executive Director

Literacy Volunteers of South Sarasota County

My name is Serhii. I'm from Ukraine and this is my story.

I often thought exploring other cultures, living another life, and trying something new would be great. My curiosity for other places in the world is probably because I am someone who always moves forward. Life is short. As my dream developed over many years, my choice of where to experience a different culture was here in the United States.

I have always been impressed with your country because it has so many possibilities, laws that work, the best economy in the world, and a wide diversity of people. I can list the advantages endlessly. Only here will you not be just an immigrant....if you work hard, you can become an important part of this society and become one more person that finds that the American dream is real. It can happen. It's a story that people from all over the world have heard about.



I started to explore how to achieve my dream by participating in the Diversity Visa (DV) immigrant program (Green Card Lottery) and I got lucky, I won! But winning this lottery doesn't mean you get handed a visa. After winning, I had to fill out a lot of documentation and wait for an interview at the U.S. Embassy in Kiev, Ukraine. And because COVID-19 was in the world that year (2021), the embassy staff that processed cases was eventually reduced and there were lots of delays.

By August 2021 after weeks of delays, I almost lost hope of getting an invitation to the interview because the last day of interviewing was 30 September. And suddenly on 30 August, I received an email with the appointment on 3 September. After that, I passed a medical examination and was interviewed. Soon after interview, my DV Visa was approved.

During all this waiting time, I explored what states would be good for my living. My two top choices were Florida and California, because I wanted to live in a warm climate and be close to the ocean. After I found out how expensive it was to live in California, I began looking for a city in Florida that was close to the ocean. Originally, I wanted to live in Miami, but rising prices for rent made me change my mind. Instead, I decided to live in North Port, where I had some friends.

On 12 February 2022, I went to the airport in Ukraine to come to the United States. When I arrived, I was told that my flight was canceled due to bad weather. So, the airport staff found another flight. It would go to Turkey and then land in Miami. This change totally confused my schedule and travel plans, but I found out later that the cause of the cancellation of so many flights leaving Ukraine that day was not bad weather, but the upcoming WAR. Four days later all foreign airlines canceled flights to Ukraine.

I was happy that I was finally here in North Port, even though I was starting my life over from scratch. I found a job at the PGT company as a team member working on the factory floor. It was not easy, especially after having been a project manager and engineer in Ukraine. Along the way, I started learning English at the North Port Library. I attended ESL 2 English classes, and later I started to attend ESL Level 2 and Level 4 English classes. In the process of studying English, Karen, who is the program coordinator, found a personal tutor, John, for me. Later I met my current tutor, Mike, who has also become a mentor to me as I adjust to life in America.

I'm very grateful to LVSSC for giving me opportunities to learn and improve my English. In February 2024, I got a part-time job as Staff Assistant for LVSSC. I am very happy to be a part of their team. I will work hard to make this organization more successful because I know how Literacy Volunteers helps immigrants improve their lives. That means a lot to me!

Continued on the bottom of page 6.

LVSSC is proud that Aksana is now an American citizen!



Aksana Shamchonak and
Nikalau Nosarau from Belarus

I have lived in the United States in the state of Florida for six years. I passed the citizenship test and now proudly live here as a citizen. Moving to a new country at the age of 48 with my husband and 9-year-old daughter was far from easy, especially without knowing English. You could say we started from scratch—finding jobs, studying, and building friendships because we couldn't imagine life without meaningful connections.

I deeply love the country where I was born and where all my relatives live, but now I can say that I have truly fallen in love with sunny Florida. The beautiful Gulf of Mexico, mild winters, lush greenery, and rich wildlife have all captured my heart, even though at first everything felt unfamiliar and foreign.

It would be unfair to call this journey my achievement alone. My beloved husband and daughters are my true friends and strong supporters. I am also incredibly grateful to the kind and attentive teachers who guided me through the process of learning the language and preparing for the citizenship exam, a process that took almost a year of dedication. These teachers not only supported my studies but also helped me overcome life's difficulties by pointing me to the right resources when I needed them most.

Over these six years, the world has faced many challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic brought immense hardship and loss.

The ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine has left its mark on the entire globe. Florida, too, has endured several devastating hurricanes, with communities constantly working to rebuild. And yet, amidst it all, so much good continues to happen in people's lives.

It's difficult to say where I feel most at home now. I have an interesting job, but I still long for deeper social connections. While I've grown much better at understanding native English speakers, there is still so much more to learn and explore.

-- Aksana Shamchonak

Continued from page 5 - Serhii's Story

This is not the end of my story. It's just the beginning of what I know will be a happy ending, because in America I can achieve a lot by continuously improving my English, studying, and working hard.

P.S. Be curious, be a dreamer, be persistent in following your dream, don't be afraid to make mistakes, always move forward, and never, never give up.

-- Serhii Horevyi

Student Success Story - Congratulations to Mariia!



Mariia moved to the U.S. from Ukraine in 2017 with her husband and four children. I began working with Mariia in June 2022, and we have been meeting twice a week at the North Port Library since that date.

While working on improving her English, Mariia decided to get her citizenship, so we began studying in earnest during 2023. She studied very hard for the test, and it took a full year from the time she applied for citizenship to the time they called her in for an interview. On September 19, 2024, Mariia passed the test and became a U.S. Citizen! Mariia stated, "I was relieved to pass the citizenship test, and it is a day I will never forget!" I would like to add that her husband and oldest son also became U.S. Citizens in the same year, but I was not their tutor.

Mariia now has five children ranging in age from 20 to 6 years old. She continues to put forth hard work in her lessons as she works to improve her English. I am so proud of her accomplishments.

-- Karen Grant, Mariia's Tutor

Thank You to Heron Creek Community Foundation in North Port!

Last month a select group of nonprofits that serve North Port attended an awards celebration at the Heron Creek Golf and Country Club. This master-planned community of just over 950 homes has a long-established Charitable Foundation, that raises contributions from their homeowners. In 2024, this amount reached a record \$103,420!

Literacy Volunteers were among the recipients.



The funds we were awarded will be used to purchase books and other training materials for our North Port-based students. Of the almost 460 students we served over the last year, some 60% reside in North Port.

We are grateful for the generosity of Heron Creek residents. Their gift will help us meet the exploding demand we are experiencing for our services, and help us keep pace with the growth North Port is now experiencing. It is now the 2nd fastest growing city in the United States and is now three times the size of neighboring Venice.

Tutor Mentoring Program / Tutor Chats

I spearheaded the creation of our **Tutor Mentoring Program** over two years ago. I wanted to ensure that our tutors felt supported and valued once their Tutor Training Class was completed. There are times when a Tutor needs a bit more encouragement, especially if the Tutor did not come from a teaching background, as most do not. I meet individually with a Tutor on Zoom, or meet in person, where we can discuss lessons, workbooks, attendance problems, and a host of other issues that may arise. This program helps build a strong sense of community. Tutors need to know they are not out there alone!



Our monthly **Tutor Chats** evolved as an extension of the **Tutor Mentoring Program**. These gatherings are more than just meetings—they are a space for open dialogue, sharing ideas, answering questions and celebrating the successes of our tutors and learners. Who doesn't like telling others how proud they are of their student or how they handled a situation? It's an opportunity for us to come together, brag a little, share experiences, and continue to build the supportive network that is so vital to tutor retention.

My **Co-Host, Rich Ames**, became a Tutor in November 2023. Together, we offer support, encouragement and a few new ideas to our tutors each month, and attendees discuss their tutoring experiences, problems, and solutions. Join us on **Tues., March 4**, for our upcoming **Tutor Chat**. We would love to see you! Contact Dell at: dell.rubin3@frontier.com I will send you a Zoom link to the **Tutor Chats**.

- Dell Rubin-Smithern

“Supporting Literacy Together” with Author Leo J. Maloney

In the mid 1960's, while in the military, Leo Maloney was recruited to become a deep cover black ops contractor for a government agency. While he was serving his country in the secretive world of Black Ops for over 30 years, he operated several “cover” businesses including a classic car brokerage, promotions and limousine companies, and a detective agency. After leaving his career in black ops, Leo continued several of his cover businesses, and also had the opportunity to try his hand at acting in independent films and TV commercials. He has written 12 Dan Morgan books and 5 Alex Morgan books (Dan's daughter), the latest of which is *Enemy Action* published in 2024.

Leo Maloney will introduce us to Dan Morgan, the hero of 17 of his novels. This is an thriller series written by a guy who knows it all, from the inside. This is your chance to hear about the exciting activity of a real-life Black Ops contractor. Leo also wrote a children's book. He had been telling stories to his granddaughter since she was a baby. Years later she asked if he would write a story with her, and that book is “The Dolan Sister' Adventure in India,” and is available on Amazon.com.

[RSVP](#) and [DONATE](#) today, every contribution large or small, helps us continue our mission. Your generosity will help us to change the lives of adults who need to improve their skills to listen, speak, read, and write English.

Tutor Training Graduates

November 2024 Tutor Training Class



January 2025 Tutor Training Class



Please help spread the message that more tutors are needed!

The next Tutor Training Workshop will be on Tuesday March 11 and Friday March 14.

Continued from page 1 - Ray, Filipp, Alina, and Carolyn

Carolyn was involved in the recruiting process at Procter & Gamble, so she and Alina worked together to develop Alina's resume and conduct practice interviews. When Alina finally received her social security card in May she started applying to positions, and in October 2024, Alina started work in an administrative position with the Sarasota County school system.

Alina shares her experience in the LVSSC tutoring relationship: "Thanks to Carolyn I have become more confident in speaking English. Her experience in corporate culture provided me with many nuances and valuable information for job interviews and job hunting. Additionally, her invitation to new tutors to join our sessions offered extra, interesting practice in conversing with new people and highlighted the importance of building a network. I started my journey with Carolyn during a challenging period when my husband was in another state, and it was emotionally tough being in a new country. Despite the hardships, I had to stay strong for our daughter. Carolyn made a great effort and significantly helped me through this difficult time."

When Carolyn helped teach the LVSSC Tutor Training class in January 2024, one student was Ray Szczepanski, an experienced tutor whose learner had recently moved on. Since Filipp had not yet been assigned a tutor, Ray requested him as a learner at Carolyn's suggestion.

"Filipp is a quick learner and a smart guy," Ray reports. "He was also really motivated." In college Ray took a course in Russian literature, and Filipp had a lifetime of exposure to Russian authors such as Leo Tolstoy. Ray leveraged that commonality and used literature as a tool in their twice-weekly tutoring sessions.

Ray also used vocabulary, puzzles and grammar lessons in his tutoring arsenal, and at Filipp's request they used flashcards on verb tenses. "My biggest challenge was answering his grammar questions!" Ray exclaimed.

Filipp studied English in high school and college, so helping him gain confidence while speaking English was a priority. Ray encouraged Filipp to word things differently if he could not remember a specific word, and their time spent in conversation increased from one third of the session to almost all their time together.

Filipp said "Ray surprised me with his knowledge and intelligence. Despite not being a professional teacher, his approach to tutoring was very professional. I am glad Ray chose me as his learner; our conversations were open and interesting, with a few 'manly' jokes thrown in." Filipp was particularly impressed by Ray's diverse teaching methods.

Filipp was a network engineer in Russia, but early in his career he wired buildings for computer networks. Since computer wiring and electrical wiring are similar skills, Filipp was able to find work here as an electrician. He would like to work again as a full-fledged engineer and is taking courses now to get the software certifications needed.

Likewise, Alina is studying online to get certified in financial software packages so she can eventually move back into her field. In the meantime, with the help of their tutors, Alina and Filipp met their goals of finding full-time employment.

Carolyn and Ray encourage LVSSC tutors to establish a good rapport with their learners, meeting them where they are in life and serving as a friend and mentor in addition to being their tutor!

Literacy Volunteers of South Sarasota County

www.LiteracyChangesLives.org

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