

## The Literacy Lantern

*Lighting the Path to Language  
and Belonging  
Spring/Summer 2026*



**Literacy Volunteers**  
of South Sarasota County

## The Revival – A New Chapter Begins

There are seasons when things grow quietly and there are seasons when they are called back to life.

It has been some time since our newsletter last made its way into your hands. Life moved. Programs shifted. Priorities stretched. And somewhere along the way, this small but meaningful thread of connection paused. Today we pick it back up. The Literacy Lantern is here with renewed purpose and steady intention. Not just as a publication, but as a gathering place for our learners, volunteers, partners, and community.

This revival is about more than formatting or fresh design. It is about consistency. It is about presence. It is about building something that reflects who we are becoming. Our organization is entering a season of growth. With that growth comes a commitment to stronger communication, deeper engagement, and clear celebration of the work happening every single day.

We are here to bring consistency.

We are here to bring structure.

We are here to bring fresh momentum.

Literacy work is not small work; it changes individual lives and families. It strengthens communities. It restores confidence. And it deserves a platform that reflects its impact.

This newsletter will serve as:

- A space to celebrate student victories
- A spotlight for our volunteers
- A bridge to our community
- A resource for continued learning
- A record of progress

If you are reading this, you are part of this story. Whether you teach, learn, volunteer, support or partner with us, you belong in these pages. We welcome you to share your insights, articles and information to be considered for future newsletters via email to [lvssc.northport@literacychangeslives.org](mailto:lvssc.northport@literacychangeslives.org)

You can keep up with the many happenings of LVSSC by following us on social media! Our Instagram account is “volunteersliteracy” and we are “Literacy Volunteers of South Sarasota County” on Facebook.

*Thank you for being part of this new chapter.*

# The Language of Resilience:

## Teaching Viktor and Oleksandra

When I first met Viktor and Oleksandra in late July of 2025, I realized that my role would be far more than just a typical ESL instructor. Unlike many refugees who arrive with only a few survival phrases, this resilient couple from Ukraine stepped into our first session in North Port with a solid, basic understanding of English. Having escaped to Poland at the dawn of the war and navigating the lengthy U4U visa process to become part of the last admitted group to enter the US under the program, they brought with them a strong determination and drive to reclaim their independence and rebuild their lives from the ground up.

Teaching them has been an exercise in witnessing both academic and personal grit. While the ESL journey can often be a slow, frustrating climb, Viktor and Oleksandra attacked the curriculum with a tenacity that was nothing short of remarkable. They blazed through the **Ventures 4** program in under four months—a milestone that typically takes up to a year to master. By the start of 2026, they had already transitioned into **Ventures Transitions**, focusing on the high-level academic and professional English necessary for true integration into the American workforce.

The most rewarding aspect of this work, however, has transcended the classroom. I have watched their hard work bear fruit, culminating in the proud moment Viktor successfully launched his own appliance repair company this past February. Navigating the complex world of business licensing, insurance, tax filings, and client communication is a hurdle for native speakers; for Viktor, it was a triumph of linguistic and entrepreneurial spirit. Yet, as impressive as these milestones are, the true reward has been the evolution of our relationship. What began as a formal teacher-student dynamic has blossomed into a genuine friendship. They haven't just learned English from me; they have

opened their hearts and welcomed me into their family as a trusted confidant.



Mark Hintz and the Shmatko Family,  
Manasota Beach

Today, my most cherished "lessons" don't happen behind a desk or over a textbook. They happen during our weekly get-togethers around the BBQ with a few beers, where we laugh about the quirks of American culture and share poignant stories of their home. We have spent many wonderful afternoons exploring the stunning beaches of Southwest Florida, from the sugar sand beach at Siesta Key, to the shark-tooth-laden sands of Venice, and the quiet, restorative stretches of Manasota Key. In these moments, the barrier of language disappears entirely, replaced by the universal dialect of shared laughter and mutual respect.

Helping Viktor and Oleksandra find their professional and personal voices hasn't just been a teaching assignment; it has been a front-row seat to the American Dream in action. Their success is a testament to the fact that when you give resilient people the right tools, they don't just rebuild their own lives—they enrich the entire community. It's been a privilege to be a part of their journey.

By Mark Hintz

# Dramatic Challenges: Needed Changes



**LITERACY CHANGES EVERYTHING**  
stronger families, better jobs,  
engaged citizens.

**INVEST IN LOCAL IMPACT**  
every dollar stays home, directly  
supporting our neighbors.



[literacychangeslives.org](http://literacychangeslives.org)

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with  
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For this year's Volunteer Appreciation Luncheon, we chose "*Chapters of Change*" as the theme to remind us that *LVSSC as an organization is built on thousands of individual student stories* — stories of courage, resilience, second chances, and the profound difference made every day by our dedicated tutors. As those personal stories continue to unfold, our organization itself has recently written some dramatic new chapters.

*In 2024, we experienced explosive growth.* We welcomed 550 student applicants, supported by nearly 200 volunteers — more than double the demand we had seen just three years earlier. Managing that rapid expansion was challenging, and *we weren't perfect, but we learned a tremendous amount along the way.*

*Our story in 2025 shifted dramatically.* Major changes in immigration policy — including the sealing of the southern border, revisions to Temporary Protected Status, a new travel ban, and increased ICE enforcement — resulted in a 30% drop in our student volume. Monthly new applicants fell from about 45 to the low 30s. That decline has continued this year, though at a slower pace.

Even with this sudden change in demand, there were important silver linings. First, unlike many other parts of the country, our local police have continued to enforce the law fairly...and most importantly without targeting immigrant families, schools, or community resources. Because of this, our student enrollment decline has been milder than that experienced in many areas of the country.

More importantly, *the slower pace has given us valuable breathing room to strengthen and modernize our program.* Learning from the challenges triggered by our rapid growth, we've been improving our onboarding process, implementing student placement testing, simplifying volunteer training, and adopting a consistent learning curriculum. This important work is being carried out by our dedicated — and often stretched — staff and volunteer leadership. *Thank you for your patience as we make these improvements.*

One of our most significant advancements has been the adoption of the **Ventures Standard Curriculum**. This has dramatically simplified volunteer training, introduced proper placement testing so we can measure each student's progress, and provided every learner with their own textbook to keep. Since last November, 49 volunteers have been trained in the Ventures curriculum — 27 new tutors and 22 experienced ones. As of the end of March, we've already distributed textbooks to 52 students.

## *Meet Simone Clark-Ashby*

North Port Library  
LVSSC Office Volunteer:  
Tuesdays and Thursdays 10 - 2



Five minutes with me and you'll figure out two things fast: I am obsessed with people, and I am equally obsessed with words.

I grew up in Orlando, in a neighborhood that felt like a little piece of Puerto Rico transplanted onto Florida soil — loud, warm, layered with different voices and ways of seeing the world. English class was the one place school felt like *mine*. Something about language just clicked, and over time that click turned into a calling. I became the friend who gently fixed your grammar, the one who noticed not just what was said but *how* it was said — the tone sitting underneath the words, the meaning living between the lines.

Because here's what I actually believe: literacy isn't just reading and writing. It's how you move through the world. It's how you walk into a room. It's the difference between being overlooked and being *heard*. Literacy builds confidence, opens doors, and hands people something they didn't know they were missing — and getting to be part of that? That never gets old.

By trade I'm a Social Director, Event Planner, and Trainer, so when I stepped into my role as a North Port Library Office & Events Volunteer, it didn't feel

like a stretch — it felt like coming home. I joined in February and I'm genuinely invested in what this place is becoming.

Outside these walls, I stay busy. Wonderfully, chaotically busy. I volunteer weekly at All Faiths food pantries and at a cat rescue sanctuary in Venice. A big piece of my heart lives inside the veteran community — my husband is a combat veteran, and that journey introduced me to some of the most resilient, underestimated people I've ever met: military spouses. The ones holding everything together while the world looks the other way. That's why I created *The Quiet Ranks*, a podcast about the real, unfiltered, behind-the-scenes life of loving someone who served.

At home, we are full and loud and a little beautifully chaotic. There's our 15-year-old, Adrian, who keeps us sharp. Our service dogs Athena and Helios. Our cats Galaxy and Astro. And me, probably spending too much time and money in my garden, or carving out a quiet hour to disappear into a book.

I just love being part of things that pull people together, lift something up, and leave a mark — even a small one. I'm really glad to be here doing exactly that. Please stop in and say hi.



## Chapters for Change Appreciation Luncheon April 14, 2026

Many thanks to LVSSC Board Member, Janita Wisch for her generous donation of glorious flowers, dinnerware and table decorations.



A salute to our learners. Thanks for joining our celebration. You are our reason to volunteer.



Tutor Pam Marble and learners.



Our organization is filled with experienced volunteers and some new to this adventure. We are delighted for this annual luncheon where we celebrate all those in every role in LVSSC.

## Honoring Our Ventures Explorers Users Group

Pam Zulauf initiated our investigation in the Ventures Program and Deb Metzler guided the investigation and implementation. Allan Metzler, Peter Norrman, Andy O'Connor, Kathleen Szczepanski, and Pam Zulauf were our explorers and trail blazers. They adopted the program and we all learned together.



Peter Norrman, Kathleen Szczepanski, Allan Metzler, Deb Metzler, and Pam Zulauf (Andy O'Connor is not pictured.)

In recognition of their efforts this group of tutors/class instructors received **The Turning Page Award**. The award states: *The Ventures Innovation Award honors those who courageously stepped forward as founding members of the Ventures Users Group. By embracing possibility and helping shape a bold new chapter, they transformed vision into action and laid the groundwork for lasting innovation. Because of their leadership the next chapter has begun.*

## Gratitude and Appreciation

This will be a new section of our newsletter. We want to acknowledge and celebrate the dedication and growth of all aspects of our organization.

We could celebrate learners: completing a level, mastering a tricky pronunciation, or showing courage in their tutoring session or class.

It could be volunteers who demonstrate dedication, creative teaching and problem solving or providing support to others. This support could be words of encouragement or providing opportunities for tutors to observe your class in person or during a Google Meet lesson.

Staff, board members, operations volunteers and community partners: there is much that occurs behind the scenes in tracking data, ordering books, organizing events, writing grants, volunteering in the library literacy offices...

We would love to spotlight a story to express our gratitude and appreciation for the work of our learners, volunteers, staff and board in each issue. In order for The Literacy Lantern to reach its potential it will take much more than the three individuals who have currently stepped up to revive our newsletter. Carolyn Pearce: our dedicated copy editor, Simone Clark-Ashby editor: concept and content idea generator and Deb Metzler: managing editor and writer. We need help and support from you.

Think about sending us an email with a personal or learner accomplishment, a moment of gratitude and or appreciation. Keep in mind it could be a small moment or a truly momentous occasion or accomplishment. We very much look forward to hearing from you. Include a picture whenever possible.

Contact Simone:

[lvsscnorthport@literacychangeslives.org](mailto:lvsscnorthport@literacychangeslives.org) or

Contact Deb: [debm@literacychangeslives.org](mailto:debm@literacychangeslives.org)



Janita Wisch, Sandy McIntyre and Nancy Pike

## Celebrating: Sandy McIntyre

At our recent Chapters of Change Appreciation Luncheon, we celebrated the decades of dedicated service of Sandy McIntyre. She has been a tutor, a member of the Board of Directors and a board officer for more years than anyone could count.

Current board member Janita Wisch and former board member Nancy Pike presented Sandy our first-ever Golden Bookmark Award.

The award states: *In heartfelt appreciation for your years of dedication and loyalty to advancing literacy. Your passion, service, and unwavering support have helped shape the Literacy Volunteers of South Sarasota County and have made a truly invaluable difference in the lives of so many.*

Sandy is retiring from the Board of Directors but her dedication and support of LVSSC and its mission will continue.



## Congratulations to Pat Tesky Southwest Airlines Raffle Winner



Through our partnership with the Florida Literacy Coalition, we were given this raffle opportunity. The raffle consisted of four one-way tickets to any location that Southwest flies. Raffle tickets were available for \$10 each. We sincerely thank all those in our organization and beyond who sold and purchased these tickets. The \$1,400 raised will be used to further the work of our organization. The winning ticket was drawn at our Chapters of Change Annual Appreciation Luncheon on April 14th. The winning ticket was held by long time tutor, Pat Tesky.

## Thank You to our Supporters and Funding Sources

In August we were pleased to receive a grant award from **North Port Nonprofit (NP2)** of \$1,785 to purchase seventeen document cameras for use by tutors and instructors. These cameras work much like the overhead projectors of old and are very handy when presenting to learners, especially in classes and when used in combination with online instruction. These items are available for sign out by contacting Serhii [lvssc.programs@literacychangeslives.org](mailto:lvssc.programs@literacychangeslives.org) If you are unfamiliar with the use of document cameras, tutorials for using these can be arranged by contacting [pamz@literacychangeslives.org](mailto:pamz@literacychangeslives.org).

**United Way South Sarasota County** provided us in September with a generous \$20,000 grant to be used in supporting our general operations. These funds are vital in funding our staff positions. Additionally, in September we received \$2,900 in funding from the **Heron Creek Community Foundation** and \$5,000 from the **Venice Golf and Country Club**. These beneficial funds are being used to purchase Ventures Series Teacher Editions. We have received \$2,500 to help fund a bilingual staff member to provide additional coverage in our LVSSC library offices from the **Arlene Quinn Trust**.

\$500 was gifted to us by **Victoria Sliepen**, a water aerobics class leader in the community of Gran Paradiso and matched through the Flanzer Trust resulting in a total donation of \$1,000. She collects \$3 from class participants and donates collected funds to various charities nominated by participants. Pam Zulauf resides in this community and nominated LVSSC.

The most recent **Giving Challenge by the Patterson Foundation** on April 15-16, 2026 resulted in individual donations totaling \$5,000 and matching funds from the Patterson Foundation for a grand total of \$10,000. We are grateful to all who donated and to the Patterson Foundation for their generous matching funds.

# The Literacy Lantern Spring 2026 Addendum: Book Distribution Processes

(Tutors please copy and or save this page and the next for reference.)

## Tutors/Instructors Trained November 2025 and Forward from There:

All tutors/instructors trained as of November 2025 and going forward are using the Ventures Series of resources by Cambridge University Press. Materials for new tutors are distributed to the tutor once they have been matched with a learner.

Those working with this standards-based series will receive: a Teacher Edition, a consumable set of two student books for each learner and a code to access online supplemental resources for their instructional level. You only need this code for group or remote teaching.

## Moving to Another Ventures Level:

If you and your learner(s) move on to another Ventures level, please contact **Serhii** [lvssc.programs@literacychangeslives.org](mailto:lvssc.programs@literacychangeslives.org) to request a specific additional teacher edition and student workbook sets. He will deliver the requested materials to the library literacy office you indicate — either **North Port** or **Venice**. He will also have the CambridgeOne code for your new level if you request one but only if you are working with more than one learner at a time or instructing remotely.

## Transitioning to Ventures:

If you transition from other resources to Ventures your current learner will need to be tested to determine their Ventures level. If you have not received training in administering this assessment contact [lvssc.venice@literacychangeslives.org](mailto:lvssc.venice@literacychangeslives.org) or Simone [lvssc.northport@literacychangeslives.org](mailto:lvssc.northport@literacychangeslives.org) to provide you test materials and guidance or to schedule them to administer the test. Once the test has been administered, please follow the procedure outlined in “Moving to Another Ventures Level” as described above.

## Returning Teacher Editions:

**Teacher’s Editions** are to be returned a.s.a.p. to one of our library offices when you are finished with that level. Please make sure to **put your name on it with a sticky note** so that we can credit you with the return.

## Tutors/Instructors Trained Prior to November 2025:

Many tutors/instructors who trained prior to November 2025 use a variety of resources. We will continue to restock Challenger and Side-by-Side books upon request. Most other workbooks at our North Port and Venice Literacy Offices will be available until they are used up.

**Consumable workbooks:** You do not need to sign these out. They can be written in and consumed by your learners.

## Items to sign out and return:

- Side-by-Side Teacher Editions and Challenger Teacher Editions
- Non-consumable texts: storybooks, novels, idiom books, picture dictionaries, and similar materials

Please return all signed-out items when you are no longer using them to the LVSSC library office from which you checked them out.

## Citizenship Resources:

We have received new Citizenship Resources. A new class is starting May 7 in Venice. Once materials are distributed to this class the additional materials will be distributed to each library office for individual tutor use.

# The Chapters Ahead

**U.S. Citizenship Class:** This 12-week class will be held at the William H. Jervy Jr. Venice Public Library beginning **Thursday, May 7** from 6:00 – 8:00. It is for learners who are ready to prepare for the U.S. Citizenship Examination or those interested in understanding American history and the structure of U.S. Government. (\$25 book fee.)

**New Tutor Training:** Training is held at the State College of Florida in North Port near Wellen Park. Each training session meets Tuesday from 9-4 and Friday 9-1. Upcoming sessions: **May 12 and 15, 2026, September 15 and 18, 2026, November 10 and 13, 2026, January 12 and 15, 2027, March 16 and 19, 2027, and May 11 and 14, 2027.** We highly recommend that Snowbirds attend our November or January training sessions in order to have time to be matched with a learner and meet several times with their learner before departing and instructing via distance learning.

Please share your experiences tutoring with your friends and neighbors and ask them to consider joining us in an upcoming training session. To register for this training please go to <http://literacychangeslives.org/> and sign up to volunteer. We will then follow up with you.

**Tutor Networking Sessions:** A thing of the past, this opportunity for tutors/class instructors to meet face-to-face to build community and share experiences has been on hiatus. The Training Committee is planning to revive this once-popular gathering. It is a time for informal fellowship, conversation, problem solving and sharing of insights. These sessions are tentatively scheduled for August, November, and February. More details will be provided when available.

## A Call to Action

We have several core supporters who wear multiple hats, as most volunteer organizations do. However, we want you to know that there is room for you in roles beyond tutor/class instructor. If you have more time that you can give to LVSSC please let us know.

We are looking specifically for individuals who have skills, talents and energy to contribute to aspects of the newsletter, fundraising and community outreach.

The **newsletter** can always use help generating topics, reaching out and gathering news and photos as well as writing articles. Contact: [debm@literacychangeslives.org](mailto:debm@literacychangeslives.org)

We are especially open to **fundraising** ideas and individuals to lead this effort. Volunteers within LVSSC who are experienced grant writers are encouraged to contact us. However, we are also very interested in individuals or groups of volunteers who have fundraising event ideas and the ability to organize and support the execution of such an event or campaign. Keep in mind we believe that no fundraising idea is a bad idea, but it might not be a good match for us. Please don't be shy - we are a hard-working, fun lot to work with!

You may be wondering just what is **community outreach**? For LVSSC, community outreach consists of representing us in public locations during events. Often, we have a table with promotion materials, and we share experiences that we have had as volunteers and generally promote our mission. These come up several times a year and it is nice to have a list of individuals who are willing to represent us if they are available on the specific day and time needed. Fundraising / Community Events Contact: [mikef@literacychangeslives.org](mailto:mikef@literacychangeslives.org)



# Literacy Volunteers of South Sarasota County

**Venice Literacy Office:**  
300 Nokomis Ave. S.  
Venice, FL 34285  
[lvssc.venice@literacychangeslives.org](mailto:lvssc.venice@literacychangeslives.org)

**North Port Literacy Office:**  
13800 S. Tamiami Trail  
North Port, FL 34287  
[lvssc.northport@literacychangeslives.org](mailto:lvssc.northport@literacychangeslives.org)

**Office staffed Mon. and Fri. 10-4**

**Office Staffed Tues. and Thurs. 10-2  
Wed. 10-4**

### LVSSC Officers

President, Mike Farmer  
Vice President, Deb Metzler  
Secretary, Deb Metzler  
Treasurer, Sandy McIntyre

### LVSSC Board of Directors

Mary Lou Belisle  
Mike Farmer  
Sandy McIntyre  
Deb Metzler  
Janita Wisch

### Literacy Coordinator

Peter Norrman

### Library Literacy Volunteer

Simone Clark-Ashby

### Program Manager

Serhii Horevyi

### Social Media Coordinator

Hanna Bairak

### Tutor/Instructor Trainers

Deb Metzler, Co-Chair  
Carolyn Pearce, Co-Chair  
Rich Ames  
Andy O'Connor  
Kathleen Szczepanski  
Pam Zulauf

### Newsletter

Deb Metzler, Managing Editor  
Simone Clark-Ashby, Editor  
Carolyn Pearce, Copy Editor

### Give via the Flanzer Trust.

**Your individual donation of \$5 - \$500 to Literacy Volunteers may be matched by the Louis & Gloria Flanzer Philanthropic Trust (Restrictions Apply).**

[www.flanzertrust.org/make-a-donation/](http://www.flanzertrust.org/make-a-donation/)

For more information, click on the [www.LiteracyChangesLives.org](http://www.LiteracyChangesLives.org) link and then click on DONATE.

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