FALL 2026 / LVSSC COMMUNITY NEWSLETTER

# The Literacy Lantern

*Lighting the Path to Language and Belonging*




## Finding her voice

A learner, a tutor, and the everyday conversations that build belonging.

**Inside: learner stories • volunteer connections program updates • citizenship preparation**

**WELCOME TO THE FALL ISSUE**

# A season of connection

**Dear LVSSC friends,**

This fall, we're celebrating the people who make learning possible: learners who keep trying, tutors who show up with patience, and neighbors who give their time and support.

These pages offer a closer look at that work, along with the practical information you need to stay involved. Thank you for being part of our community.

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*Every conversation is an opportunity to connect.*

LEARNER STORY / BY CAROLE LEVESQUE

# Finding her voice

## Zhanna's journey in English and America

When Zhanna and her husband left Odessa with their two young daughters, they were leaving much more than a home. War had made safety uncertain, and the way forward led through Romania and France to Boston, then to eight months with a relative in Minnesota. Through every change, their daughters' well-being came first.

I met Zhanna in March 2024 after choosing her name from an LVSSC learner list. I hoped to help someone feel more at home in the United States. Our first conversation was awkward, but family photographs on our phones gave us a place to begin.

I showed Zhanna photographs of my family to introduce words for relatives. She understood and shared pictures of her own. It was our first success. For much of that first year, photographs helped us talk about activities, places, celebrations, and what the children were wearing. Just as valuable, they gave Zhanna the pleasure of talking about her daughters.

*Family photographs gave us a place to begin.*

**Continued on the next page**
FINDING HER VOICE / CONTINUED

# Lessons from everyday life

Although speaking English was difficult at first, Zhanna could already read and write quite well, having studied English in school in Ukraine. Her knowledge of American history surprised me. Around the Fourth of July, we discussed Independence Day and the Constitution, along with parades, fireworks, and barbecues. Ukrainian holiday displays at the North Port Library gave us another way to compare traditions and learn new words.

## A lesson can begin over coffee

Zhanna is an avid cook, so food often finds its way into our conversations. Over coffee at a Ukrainian bakery, she told me about korovai, a traditional wedding bread whose decorations represent love, fertility, wealth, and abundance. Meanwhile, her daughters needed little introduction to American hamburgers, pizza, and wings!

Other lessons have focused on the tasks that help a family settle into daily life: making a medical appointment, writing to a school about an absence, or preparing for a parent-teacher conference. Zhanna chose to stay home to help her daughters adjust to American schools. She has shared many proud moments as they have been recognized for their accomplishments.

FINDING HER VOICE / CONTINUED

# Progress takes partnership

Seventy-five minutes together each week cannot make learning a language easy. Structured lessons, including Ventures, help, but Zhanna's determination matters enormously. She bicycles to the library, rarely cancels, and completes her homework with care. When grammar becomes frustrating, I ask her to teach me a little Russian. My own struggles usually bring laughter and remind us both how much effort learning requires.

This partnership asks something of me, too. If I expect Zhanna to put care into learning, she deserves the same care from me. Her questions challenge me to explain things better. Her pride in her progress is one of the great rewards of volunteering.

More than two years after our first meeting, I see someone who is more capable in English than she gives herself credit for. Her daughters have become ambassadors for the language at home. For this family, progress means being able to participate, connect, and enjoy life in America. That is the success we are working toward.

*"Her pride in her progress is one of the great rewards of volunteering."*

**VOLUNTEER CONNECTIONS**

# Good ideas grow when we gather



The August Literacy Links gathering

Our August Literacy Links networking session brought 14 tutors and classroom instructors together at the State College of Florida on August 20. It was our first networking event in more than two years, coordinated by Carolyn Pearce and Andy O'Connor.

*"Very well done! Hopefully this was the first Literacy Link event with more to come."*

Serhii Horevyi, Director of Operations, explained how a tripling of demand for literacy services led to a consultant-led selfassessment. LVSSC is moving toward centralized processes so learners and volunteers can receive more consistent support. An organization chart will be shared with volunteers following participant feedback.

**VOLUNTEER CONNECTIONS / CONTINUED**

# Support worth sharing

Although Simone Clark-Ashby could not attend, her slides walked participants through the learner intake journey, including in-person registration and assessment. Andy reviewed tutor resources, including Chromebooks and document cameras, and encouraged more practice through classes and Student Chats. Sandy McIntyre shared LACES data showing that almost a quarter of our learners use more than one LVSSC service.

Dell Rubin-Smithern highlighted monthly Tutor Chats and her availability as a tutor mentor. Kathleen Szczepanski discussed Ventures, now included in Tutor Training. Carolyn's new Volunteer Advocate role will help new tutors find the support they need.

Small groups closed the session by discussing what they need from LVSSC. Leadership is following up on those ideas. Thank you to everyone who contributed.

## Join us on November 6

**Friday, November 6, 2026 1:00–4:00 p.m.**
**State College of Florida**

Come connect with fellow tutors and instructors at our next Literacy Link Networking Session. Please register through the email flyer you received. We look forward to seeing you!

# Free instruction Clear next steps

Our instruction will remain free. Updated registration, resource fee, and materials procedures take effect November 1, 2026.

## $25

**STUDENT REGISTRATION**

New applicants must pay the $25 Student Registration Fee before being assigned to a tutor or instructor.

## $40

**LEARNING RESOURCES**

Workbooks will be provided after the $40 learning resource fee is paid. The first tutor–learner meeting will focus primarily on getting acquainted, giving learners who need it additional time to arrange payment.

### Moving to the next level

For Ventures and Side by Side, the next workbook is provided after the learner pays the $40 resource fee for that level and the tutor returns the previous level's Teacher's Edition.

**PROGRAM UPDATE / CONTINUED**

# Materials and support




## Already paid for the year

Learners who paid the annual resource fee between July 1 and November 1, 2026, remain covered through June 30, 2027. They will not be charged another resource fee during that period. Serhii has the list of eligible learners.

## One place for materials

All Ventures and Side by Side materials will move from the libraries to the North Port Literacy Center office, which will handle ordering and distribution.

Registration fees support enrollment and administrative work; resource fees help pay for learning materials. About 30% of learners have unpaid required fees despite reminders. Consistent procedures help us manage limited resources and treat learners fairly.

**Questions? Contact Serhii:**

lvssc.programs@literacychangeslives.org

**A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE / SERHII HOREVYI**

# My next chapter

## From English learner to Director of Operations

In my Winter 2025 newsletter article, I shared my story about coming from Ukraine to the United States, starting a new life, and learning English at the North Port Library. I also wrote about how happy I was to become part of Literacy Volunteers of South Sarasota County. Today, I would like to share another important step in my journey.

On July 1, 2026, I became the Director of Operations at LVSSC. When I first came here to learn English, I never imagined that one day I would work in this role. I am very happy about this opportunity and grateful for the trust the organization has placed in me.

Mike Farmer, the President of LVSSC, was my English tutor when I first joined the program. He continues to be my tutor and mentor, and I am very grateful for his guidance, encouragement, and support. Having someone who believes in you can make a tremendous difference, especially when you are learning a new language and building a new life in another country.

English is my second language, and I know I still have a lot to learn. Sometimes it is challenging, but I believe we never stop learning. My own experience as an English learner also helps me understand the challenges our students face. I know how difficult it can be to learn English, adjust to a new environment, and build a life in another country. I also know how much a good tutor and a supportive community can help.

MY NEXT CHAPTER / CONTINUED

# Giving something back

As Director of Operations, I want to help LVSSC continue its important work by making our daily operations more organized and consistent. My goal is to support our staff and volunteers, improve our processes, and help ensure that our students receive the support they need. I believe that when we work together and have clear processes in place, we can serve our students more effectively.

When I look back at my journey, I am reminded of how much can change when people have opportunities and someone who believes in them. I am proud of this journey, but I also know that I did not do it alone. I had people who helped me, encouraged me, and gave me opportunities to grow.

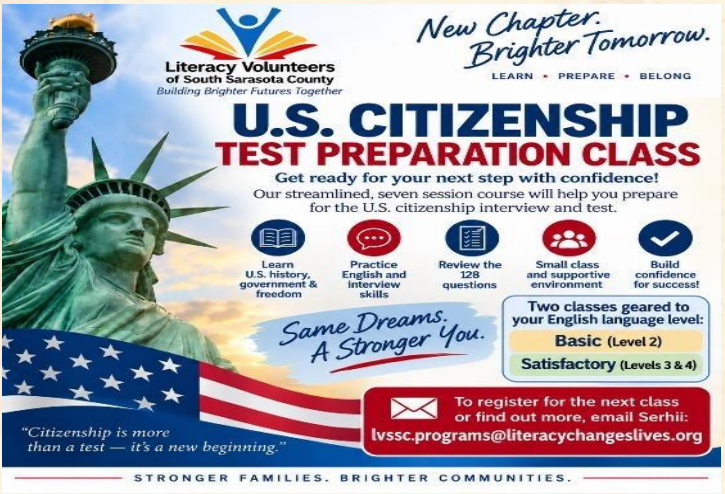
LVSSC has given me so much, and now I have the opportunity to give something back. I want to continue learning, working hard, and helping this organization make a difference in the lives of others.

I hope my story encourages others to keep learning, keep moving forward, and stay open to new opportunities. I know from my own experience that life can take us in directions we never expected.

*"Having someone who believes in you can make a tremendous difference."*

**CITIZENSHIP PREPARATION**

# A milestone worth preparing for




For many LVSSC students, learning English means more than having easier conversations, finding better employment, or navigating daily life. It is an essential part of a much larger journey: becoming a United States citizen.

Each year, hundreds of thousands of lawful permanent residents take the Oath of Allegiance and become Americans. In fiscal year 2024, USCIS welcomed 818,500 new citizens, including approximately 93,300 Florida residents. Florida ranked second only to California. Behind those numbers are people whose journeys require years of commitment, preparation, and hope.

## Citizenship requires preparation

Becoming a citizen is not automatic. Applicants generally must have been lawful permanent residents for at least five years, although certain spouses of U.S. citizens may qualify after three years. They must also meet residence and physical-presence requirements, demonstrate good moral character, and satisfy other eligibility standards.

For most applicants filing on or after October 20, 2025, the civics test draws from 128 official questions about American history and government. A USCIS officer asks up to 20 questions orally, and applicants must answer 12 correctly to pass. Special rules apply to some applicants.

Topics include the Constitution, the Revolutionary War, the branches of government, and the responsibilities of citizenship. Consider these examples:

- How many voting members serve in the U.S. House of Representatives?
- What does the Constitution do?
- Who lived in America before Europeans arrived?

Even people born in the United States may need considerable study to answer confidently. Students learning English must also understand each question and express their answers clearly.

Most applicants must demonstrate English proficiency. Speaking is assessed during the interview. Separate reading and writing tests require applicants to correctly read one of up to three sentences and correctly write one of up to three

sentences. For approved applicants, the journey culminates in an Oath of Allegiance ceremony.

CITIZENSHIP PREPARATION / CONTINUED

### Two courses and one goal

LVSSC will offer two citizenship preparation classes tailored to students' English proficiency.

### Level 2 with Jean Smucker

Jean will continue teaching our 16-session course at the Venice Library, providing additional time for language development, explanation, and practice.

### Levels 3 and 4 with Jim Patterson

Jim, a former LVSSC President, will teach a seven-session course for more advanced learners. Their stronger English comprehension allows the class to move through the material at a faster pace.

Both courses focus on civics knowledge, including the 128 official questions and accepted answers; English communication, through speaking, reading, and writing practice; and confidence, built through familiarity and repeated practice.

Jean and Jim understand that memorizing facts is only part of the preparation. Students also need to listen carefully, understand what is being asked, and respond clearly. Our classes provide a supportive place to develop those skills.

## Now open to the general public

For the first time, these classes are available to the wider community. Participants do not need to be enrolled in another LVSSC program.

The fee is $40 for members of the public

or

$25 for existing LVSSC students.

Each fee includes a preparation book containing all 128 official civics questions and answers. The book is the students to keep for continued study at home.

### Planning ahead

The LVSSC class fee is separate from the federal citizenship application fee. The standard fee for Form N-400 is $710 online or $760 on paper. Eligible applicants may qualify for a reduced fee or a fee waiver. Processing times and interview schedules vary; consult current USCIS information when planning.

USCIS test and study information

USCIS application details and fees

Class interest and questions: Direct to Serhii Horveyi
lvssc.programs@literacychangeslives.org

**For many of our students, citizenship represents years of effort and hope. We are proud to help them prepare for that final stretch.**

# You make learning possible

Thank you to the individuals, organizations, and community groups whose financial support helps sustain our learners and programs.

## $20,000

United Way of South Sarasota

## $10,000

Dollar General

## $5,000–$9,999

Flanzer Trust Venice Golf and Country Club

## $1,000–$4,999

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Carol Gress
Heron Creek Country Club
Sandy McIntyre
Michael Juday
King's Gate Round Table
Allan & Deb Metzler
Carolyn Pearce
Nancy Pike
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Helen Russette
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## $200–$499

Mary Lou Belisle
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Dan Heschmeyer
Mary Juday
Donald Moore
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# Our caring community

**Thank you to our supporters giving $100–$199.**

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David Teskey

## Every gift matters

**Thank you to our supporters giving $25–$99.**

Bonnie Hobgood
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## With gratitude to our supporters

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United Way of South Sarasota County
www.uwssc.org

SCF
STATE COLLEGE OF FLORIDA
MANATEE · SARASOTA

Florida Literacy Coalition, Inc.

A member organization of ProLiteracy

SALA
Suncoast Adult Literacy Alliance

DOLLAR GENERAL

# A place to begin

## Venice Library Literacy Office

William H. Jervey, Jr. Venice Public Library 300 Nokomis Ave. S., Venice

**Wednesday 2–6 p.m.**
**Thursday 10 a.m.–6 p.m.**

Lvssc.venice@literacychangeslives.org

## North Port Library Literacy Office

13800 S. Tamiami Trail, North Port

**Tuesday and Thursday 10 a.m.–2 p.m. Wednesday 10 a.m.–1 p.m.**

Lvssc.northport@literacychangeslives.org

## LVSSC Literacy Center

6919 Outreach Way, North Port

**Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday 9 a.m.–5 p.m.**

Lvssc.programs@literacychangeslives.org

## Find us on Facebook

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- Vice President and Secretary — Deb Metzler
- Treasurer — Paul Zulauf

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- Mary Lou Belisle
- Mike Farmer
- Deb Metzler
- Janita Wisch
- Paul Zulauf

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**Director of Operations**
Serhii Horevyi

**Community Engagement Coordinator**
*North Port Library*
Simone Clark-Ashby

**Literacy Coordinator**
*Venice Library*
Peter Norrman

## Tutor and Instructor Trainers

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

## Communications Team

- Simone Clark-Ashby
- Deb Metzler
- Carolyn Pearce






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