

Tutor - Student Story

The Wheel of Life Balance



*Yulia Aleksandrova and
her teacher Linda Whitney*

This year I will celebrate my 30th birthday. It is the best time to start changing my life. All my life, I have been trying to balance the “wheel of life.” In the 1960s, Paul J. Meyer, founder of the Success Motivation Institute, created the Wheel of Life tool to help people reach their potential. I plan to work on personal growth, physical fitness, and career.

For personal growth, I decided to work on self-discipline in learning English and doing sports. I feel that I lack self-discipline, which is key to success. Most people start new goals on a Monday or New Year but lose motivation in two weeks. I understand that motivation is not enough. I need to have my own goal, something I truly want, not just a trend from social media. Also, I should define small steps to achieve my goals.

For example, my first goal is to learn English better. I divided it into small steps and learned three new words every day. Three words a day may seem small, but in a week, I will know 21 words, and in a month—81! Next, I will watch short movies and Instagram videos in English. Also, I will meet once a week with my English tutor. The key is to make small, consistent steps.

Another area of life balance is sports. Right now, I am not motivated to exercise regularly. I analyzed this and found the problem—I want quick results, just like in English. When I don’t see results, I lose motivation. This year, I decided to track my weight and measurements and take photos every month to see progress. I know I won’t be a fitness model in a month, but small steps will lead to results. Also, I am more comfortable exercising at home, which saves time. My recommendation is to create a good atmosphere for sports—choose a cozy space, put on lovely music, or wear a beautiful sports outfit. And remember—small steps lead to big results.

The next part of the wheel of life balance is work. My job goal is also related to English. I am a hairdresser and want to open a beautiful salon to work with American women. My first step is to learn English for the professional workplace. Next, I will study local beauty salons to understand how they work. I can develop a professional blog in English—it will help me in the future.

I have a lot to do. At first, it seems impossible. But when I break my big goals into small steps, I know I will succeed! Also, my husband supports me in all my goals and checks my progress. I have no chance of failure!

Moving Forward with Purpose, and the People who make it possible!



Dell Rubin-Smithern
Retired President LVSSC

As we approach the end of our fiscal year on June 30, we have much to celebrate and even more to look forward to. This year has been a time of growth and renewal for Literacy Volunteers of South Sarasota County. We welcomed a dynamic new Executive Director, Saara Ullery, whose vision and energy are already making a positive impact. Our Annual Luncheon was a resounding success, a joyful gathering that honored the dedication of our tutors, our many volunteers and the inspiring progress of our adult learners.

We are deeply grateful to our hard-working Board of Directors, our Tutor Trainers and to staff members Karen Bridegam, Peter Norrman and Serhii Horevyi for their hard work and unwavering dedication to LVSSC. These folks are the strength of our LVSSC community, and they share the commitment that fuels everything we do.

Speaking of fuel, **[donations are the fuel](#)** that ensures our doors at LVSSC stay open! Every donation, no matter the size, is important to Literacy Volunteers of South Sarasota County. Please visit our website at: **www.literacychangeslives.org**. Please donate today! Thank you for being a part of this important journey!

President's Letter

It is with great humility that I step into the role of your President for the coming year. It's a true privilege to serve an organization like LVSSC, which has transformed so many lives since our founding in 1982. Having been a tutor for the past couple of years, I am personally inspired by the passion and dedication represented in every one of our teaching and learning moments. Our mission is both simple and powerful: improving lives through literacy. Together, we have a unique opportunity to shape the future of LVSSC by finding and learning from the 'best practices' in adult literacy and by collaborating with other like-minded organizations. In this regard, our efforts will focus on four priorities:

- Embracing classroom and group learning to foster connection and collaboration.
- Leveraging practical online learning tools to make education more accessible for our students.
- Providing standardized curricula to support our new volunteers in their teaching journey.
- Measuring student progress through individualized learning goals to celebrate their achievements.

While our methods may evolve, the core of our work will remain the same: being a catalyst behind the inspiring stories of student success. These stories reflect the heart of generations of ordinary people, like all of us and our families, achieving remarkable things through educational opportunity.

Thank you for your dedication. I'm eager to work alongside you to continue transforming lives through literacy.



Mike Farmer
President LVSSC

Annual Luncheon, April 8, 2025 - Photo Gallery



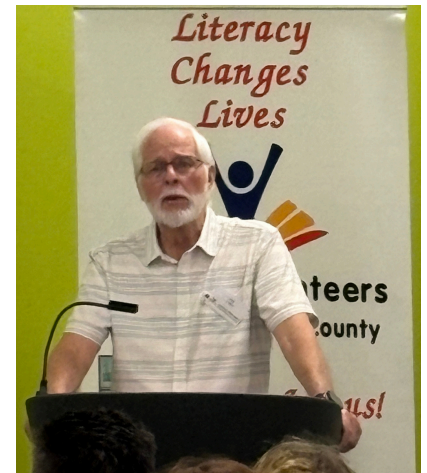
Annual Volunteer Appreciation Luncheon 2025

Celebrating Community at the Annual Volunteer Appreciation Luncheon

On April 8, 2025, the Shannon Staub Library came alive with joy as more than 100 volunteers, adult learners, friends, and LVSSC staff gathered for our Annual Volunteer Appreciation Luncheon. The room buzzed with laughter, heartfelt hugs, and meaningful conversations. Original artwork by local artist Hanna Bairak added beauty and inspiration to the walls, setting the perfect tone for the day. Volunteers from the START (Sharing Talents and Resources Together) organization generously lent their support, keeping the buffet tables looking as inviting as the atmosphere felt. One of the most touching moments came when attendees shared their personal experiences, highlighting the deep connections formed through our work together. To capture the spirit of the event, guests were invited to write down a single word that reflected how they were feeling - a small gesture that spoke volumes about the impact of our community.

Gratitude Acceptance Loving Inspiration Warmth Happy!
Enriching Caring Enthusiasm Revitalized Refreshing Hope!

Joe LaDu started volunteering with Literacy Volunteers in March 2010 as a tutor before becoming the instructor of the Saturday Advanced Conversation class in North Port. After 15 years of dedicated service, Joe is now stepping down from his role as instructor. As a retired pastor, Joe joked that he would try not to let his farewell speech turn into a sermon. Reflecting on his time with the organization, he shared that leading the Conversation class has been an enriching experience. He expressed his gratitude for the commitment and enthusiasm of his students, noting their inspiring dedication to learning English.



Joe LaDu
Tutor LVSSC

Exciting Volunteer Opportunity! LVSSC desperately needs additional tutors and classroom instructors to handle the surge of new learners, so the LVSSC Training Team needs some existing tutors to help train the new ones!

Our remaining 2025 classes will be Tuesday, July 8 and Thursday July 10; Tuesday, September 9 and Friday September 12; and Wednesday, November 12 and Friday November 14. For more information, please contact Carolyn Pearce (Carolyn.s.pearce@gmail.com)

SPECIAL THANK YOU TO OUR LOCAL BUSINESSES FOR THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE ANNUAL LUNCHEON



NORTH PORT SUBS, LITTLE BROOKLYN FOOD HOUSE, NORTH PORT NATURAL FLORIST, QUE RICO, EUROPEAN FOOD MARKET



Saara Ullery, Emily Shaw, Tiffany Carter, Mike Farmer, Karen Bridegam, Kevin Shahan, Serhii Horevnyi

The North Port Area Chamber of Commerce celebrates those members who have supported our Chamber for 5, 10, 15, 20, 25, 30, and 35 years. We are very thankful and grateful that Literacy Volunteers of South Sarasota County has been a member of our Chamber for 10 years.

Building Bridges, Sharing Stories: The Ripple Effect of Community Literacy



Saara Ullery
Executive Director LVSSC

At LVSSC, every shared story, every new connection, and every learning milestone reminds us that literacy is more than just reading and writing—it's about belonging, believing, and building a better future together.

This year, our Annual Appreciation Luncheon became a powerful reflection of that truth. As tutors and learners shared their stories, we saw relationships deepen and bridges form—connecting hearts across cultures, languages, and life experiences. The ripple effect of our mission came to life in the room, reminding us why we do what we do.

We were proud to showcase our local impact through the Let's Make a Book event, where nearly 30 participants contributed their voices to a collaborative project that celebrated creativity and courage.

Our community's accomplishments extended far beyond this event. One of our learners, the author of *The Wheel of Life Balance*, was honored to have their work published in 2025 *Perspectives*, a prestigious collection of essays from the Florida Literacy Coalition.

Our learners also stepped into leadership roles, sharing their journeys at the Ukrainian National Women's League of America monthly meeting—bringing awareness, understanding, and inspiration to a wider audience.

We've been warmly welcomed by local organizations, including the Venice Nokomis Women's Club, and proudly celebrated a decade of membership with the North Port Chamber of Commerce. These partnerships continue to strengthen our presence in the community and open new doors for collaboration and support.

Generous grants from literacy leaders have further amplified our impact, allowing us to reach more learners and equip more tutors. With the support of our dedicated volunteers and community allies, LVSSC is growing not only in size but in heart.

Together, we are not just teaching literacy—we are building community. A community grounded in kindness, mutual respect, and an unshakable belief in one another's potential.

Thank you for being a vital part of this journey.

KNOW YOUR RIGHTS

If you need assistance finding legal help, housing, immigration, food, or shelter, please check out this great resource! <https://resourceguide.making-an-impact.org/venice-north-port-area/>

For native Spanish speakers, UniDosNow can also help with navigating the changing immigration laws. <https://www.unidosnow.org/>

TASTES LIKE HOME

Rita Rikka-Williams

Settled in at a cozy table at the Colombian restaurant Que Rico in North Port, my student Tania took a bite of her arepa. She chewed slowly and carefully with her eyes closed. The tears began to cascade down her cheeks and she said “It tastes like home. Like in Colombia!” Tania shared with me the story of arepas being the “daily bread” in Colombia in every home kitchen in Colombia and at every restaurant as well. The arepas are made from ground corn, or maize, and are shaped to be flat patties that can be steamed or fried. They can be filled or topped with cheese and a wide variety of things like chicken, avocado, salad greens and sauces. An arepa with butter and cheese is a popular breakfast food and snack in Colombia.

Tania’s emotional reaction to food from home caused me to reflect about how we all react to food. It’s not merely about sustenance, yes, food is fuel. We all have food memories, most of them are good ones! The smells, the sight, the sounds and the taste of foods bring about valuable memories that make us who we are. I grew up in an Estonian home where weeks before Christmas the making of blood sausages began.

My grandmother went to the butcher to buy quarts of animal blood, intestines, salt pork and bags of barley. With a special head kerchief, apron and a lot of loud yelling, she “employed” family members to help her create these sausages. I will always remember the sound of the cooked barley in blood being forced into the sausage casings using wooden spoons (a distinctive squishy sound that I will never forget). The sausages were baked and came out black and crisp. A true peasant delicacy reserved for the holiday season! A lesson in the use of the entire animal with the addition of a locally grown grain. These sausages caused me to observe a vegetarian doctrine. But the making of pipparkook, a crisp, spicy ginger cookie, was quite the opposite. The dough consisted of many spices that were difficult to obtain in Estonia. In the U.S., however, all the spices necessary were easily obtained. The best cinnamon and ground ginger were ordered from the city. Black pepper was ground and added. Dark molasses, carefully sifted flour and fresh eggs from our chicken farm were stirred in to the mixture. The dough was made in late November and kept in the freezer. Days before Christmas the massive cookie making event began. The cookies were rolled out tissue-thin, cut with special cookie cutters, and baked to a crisp and spicy texture. Pipparkook were often shared with other Estonians and a strong competition occurred with many grandmothers in our town to see whose cookies were the thinnest and tastiest. I can smell those cookies now, years later. I have a very good memory of how the crunch led to the taste of butter, sugar and spices with the echo of my grandmother’s voice telling everyone how her cookies were the best. Yes, food memories are a large part of who we are; our culture, our heritage, our good times. Our emotions. I am sure that everyone reading this has some kind of food memory that can be shared with others. Is it a special holiday food? Is it something that was special to your family? Thinking about the “taste of home” gives us many opportunities to share anecdotes, recipes and even delicious food with others. Connecting with people is what our organization is all about! I will be visiting that special Colombian restaurant in North Port with my student, Tania, again, soon, to eagerly try some of the other delicacies that they offer and listen to her stories about her life in Colombia. Blood sausages will not be part of our conversation.

Suncoast Remake Learning Days - “Let’s Make a Book”



The Veranda Room at the North Port Library was full of families making original books together on Saturday, April 26. Literacy Volunteers of South Sarasota County participated in the **Suncoast Remake Learning Days** with the mission of adults and children learning together. Throughout Sarasota, Charlotte, DeSoto, and Manatee counties from April 19 through May 3 there were hundreds of opportunities for families to come together and learn together. Our “Let’s Make a Book” literacy activity encouraged parents and children to make an original book together. Sandy McIntyre, Rita Rikka-Williams and Saara Ullery led the event. Sandy and Saara attended Muscle Building webinars sponsored by the Suncoast Campaign for Grade-Level Reading. Rita Rikka-Williams created the event idea and taught the families in full costume as “Rizza” the wizard of books.

Blank books, markers, crayons, paints and pencils were given to families free of charge. Rita Rikka-Williams and Mark Williams donated the blank books, art supplies and snacks for the event.

The family-made creative and original books were amazing! With kid-friendly music in the background and lots of snacks, everyone was very happy to become authors and illustrators.

One family created an entire book with words and illustrations about planets. Another family made a book about crabs with very lifelike illustrations and facts. An endearing book about home and family was proudly shared with new friends. A mother and son crafted world-travel books with carefully drawn maps. There were many magic moments during the almost 2 hours that were spent drawing, painting, coloring and writing. After the event, many families stayed at the North Port Library to read together in the beautiful children’s section of the library!

Sandy, Saara and Rita were joined by volunteers Mark Williams and Nikki McGowan to help make the event run smoothly.

Many, many thanks to the Patterson Foundation for funding the **Suncoast Remake Learning Days** events. Our participation earned a grant award of \$1,500.00 for Literacy Volunteers to encourage future literacy-themed events.



Tutor Training Graduates

March 2025 Tutor Training Class



May 2025 Tutor Training Class



Please help spread the message that more tutors are needed!

The next Tutor Training Workshop will be on Tuesday July 8 and Thursday July 10.

Literacy Volunteers of South Sarasota County

www.LiteracyChangesLives.org

**Mailing Address and Venice Literacy Office: 300 Nokomis Ave.
S. Venice, FL 34285 Phone: 941-861-1352
lvssc.venice@literacychangeslives.org**

**North Port Literacy Office, 13800 S. Tamiami Trail
North Port, FL 34287 Phone: 941-861-1320
lvssc.northport@literacychangeslives.org**

**North Port Literacy Centre, 6919 Outreach Way
North Port, FL 34287 Phone: 941-429-37-17**

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