

Adult Basic Education -- Success Story 2007

Liz Grantham

“My sisters can read anything! I want to pick books up and read ‘em the way they do!” Such is the no-nonsense approach that Liz Grantham brought to Tompkins Learning Partners.

Born in Ames, Iowa, Liz moved east to Connecticut as a young child. She grew up in a “big, old house with eleven rooms, three bathrooms, and an attic,” that she fondly remembers as being “the color of natural wood and it still has the sign that says 1770 on it.”

“We had a variety of books and magazines at our house,” she says. “My sisters and my mother read a lot. I would buy books that I wished I could read. I wasn’t very good at it though.” Both of Liz’s sisters are older, Liz states, and, she admits, “both were better students than I was.”



Early in 2006, Liz moved to Ithaca to live with her sister, Deb. When Liz visited TLP for the first time, she expressed not only an eagerness to improve her reading skills, but also a desire to pursue other activities, among them drawing, water-color painting, and photography. She has since taken classes at the Community School for Music and Art and hopes to enroll in others in the future.

Staying physically fit is also important to Liz. “I joined Island Fitness,” she said, “I use the gym machines and I swim, too,” adding that her fitness goal is to “keep in shape and keep her weight down.” And just for fun, Liz says, “I juggle!”

It’s not difficult to believe that Liz describes herself as hardworking. She worked hard with her TLP tutor, Deanna Crossgrove for nearly one year. Deanna and Liz met twice a week most weeks. Liz chose to read, “Short Dog Stories,” a book she is proud to report she finished reading. She also wrote and edited a long essay titled “My House,” which includes many details about what is important to her about her family home in Connecticut.

And, all of Liz and Deanna’s hard work is paying off. When it came time to focus on measurable achievements, Liz took a reading test which showed a gain of almost two grade equivalents!

Setting specific goals and regular practice really works, according to Deanna, who planned each lesson around Liz’s interests and reading practice needs. Liz notices that when she reads now, her eyes don’t hurt the way they used to. She adds with a smile, “I can read license plates while riding in a car, the numbers *and* the names of states, if they’re not too far away. I can read road signs now, too.”

Unfortunately, the momentum of Liz’s reading and writing progress was stalled temporarily this summer when Deanna took a leave from tutoring. After several long weeks of waiting, Liz has recently been matched with a new tutor.

Changing tutors is a little like moving to a new town. Ithaca is not Connecticut. The new tutor is not Deanna. It takes courage and trust for a student to share reading goals with someone she is just getting to know. Liz says, “Working with the new tutor will really be different. Even the schedule is different. But that’s okay.” Liz says she can stay motivated because her goal to “read like her sisters” is most important to her.

From painting to tap dancing, photography to staying fit, there will be no shortage of interests for Liz to choose to read and write about with her new tutor. So it’s probably a good thing Liz likes to juggle. Just for fun!

Story written by TLP’s ABE Coordinator Arline Woolley.

Tompkins Learning Partners, Inc.



English as a Second Language -- Success Story 2007

“When I came here, I felt unhappy and afraid,” says Ha Nguyen, “because the first day I went to the United States, I did not know any English.” Her husband, Hai Tran, recounts their first day in the U.S., back in January of 2006. He talks about the panic they felt navigating two airport stopovers without the ability to read any of the signs, or ask anyone for directions.

Then when they got here, there was the cold. In their native Saigon, there was only a dry season, hot, and a rainy season, hotter, but no wintertime. Ha also missed her adult children, and wished she could move back to be near them. Her daughter was expecting, and Ha couldn’t be there for the birth. Although they came to Ithaca and joined Hai’s sister who had moved here in 1981, they felt alone, and thought a lot about home.

Ha Nguyen and Hai Tran



When Hai and Ha first began studying English in a BOCES class, it was difficult, and they lagged behind in the class. They had studied a little English way back in school – over 30 years ago. They were getting started late in life. It seemed like a monumental task, and with all this homesickness, it was hard to stay motivated. Ha’s BOCES teacher brought them to Tompkins Learning Partners where they were matched with their volunteer tutors Richie Holtz and Julie Brumsted.

Their tutors have helped them fill in the gaps. Certain things that had made it so difficult to understand were worked out in tutoring sessions. Hai complains that English has all these words that sound the same, like “sit, six, and sick!” With their tutors they can work at listening comprehension at their own pace. They often spend time sounding out all the “funny” English sounds, and laughing when they don’t come out right. With the individualized attention, Ha went from lagging behind in her BOCES class to jumping ahead a level.

As they progressed in English, what really changed was their confidence level. They don’t feel frightened anymore about striking up conversations and making friends, which has really helped them feel less isolated. Julie and Richie have been teaching them phrases to use with customers at the restaurant where they work together. Ha has learned the English names of Vietnamese foods. Now she can ask for them in the Chinese grocery store to prepare the phenomenal dishes that she shares with everyone at Tompkins Learning Partners. The great thing about English, Hai says, is that if you speak English, “you talk to people from all over the world.” Ha agrees; she says, “Now I listen and read and write and talk more English. I have many friends study English with me.”

They are not learning English overnight. Hai says that last year, when Julie and Richie would talk, he couldn’t understand them at all. Now he understands a lot more – but not everything! They work hard, though, and their tutors are dedicated to helping them improve. Now, instead of longing for home, Ha now hopes to become a citizen and petition for her children to join her here in Ithaca.

Ha and Ha would like to share their gratitude to their teachers and Tompkins Learning Partners. Ha speaks for both of them when she says, “Thank you so much to everybody [who] helps all student [who] need to learn English.”

Story written by TLP’s ESL Coordinator Sarah B. White