



# Literacy Matters

Fall 2024

## *The Positive Tania Philosophy of Life*

Tania came to Venice from Colombia in October 2023 to work as an au pair for a Venice family with two small children. Coming to the U.S. alone at age 26 with no English language ability, she describes as an “adventure.”

Her two young charges, ages 5 and 8, brought her to the Venice Library. They were familiar with the library and wanted to share their love of books with Tania. However, they soon realized that Tania spoke almost no English and could not read anything in English.

Barely able to reach up to the library desk, the tiny girl asked the librarian quietly if she had any books in Spanish for Tania.

The kind librarian told her that yes, there were books in Spanish in the library, but that the Venice Library had a person who could help with English as well. She directed them to Peter Norrman in the Literacy office.

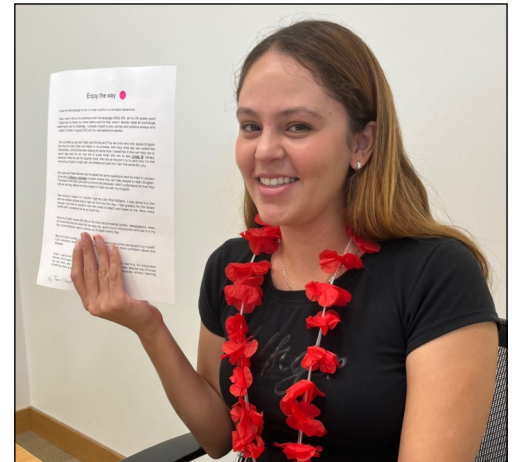
Peter found that Tania wanted very much to learn English. She was soon matched with a tutor, Rita Rikka-Williams, who began tutoring her weekly in October 2023. Tania was very motivated to learn English and furiously devoted herself to studying while taking care of her au pair duties. The children helped her to learn English, and they visited the library often.

By April 2024, Tania had progressed in her English skills from a level 0 to a level 5! She can now read novels and likes the works of Nicholas Sparks. Tania explains her “process” as one of hard work and constant learning.

Tania speaks about the possibilities that one can have in the United States with a good attitude and proper goals. Tania’s tutor named Tania’s attitude “The Positive Tania Philosophy of Life.”

She is looking forward to taking classes at State College of Florida in Business soon, and she is thinking about the future as a citizen and a business owner. And she would like to buy a house.

Spend a few minutes with Tania and you will be impressed with her fluent English skills, and you will be inspired with her positive attitude. You will have a better understanding of the American Dream and the infinite opportunities that we enjoy in this country.



## President's Corner



Dell Rubin-Smithern

As I step into the role of President of the Board of Directors for Literacy Volunteers of South Sarasota County, I am filled with gratitude and excitement for the journey ahead. I have seen firsthand the incredible impact our organization has on individuals and our community.

I have been a tutor for the past two years and spearheaded the creation of our Tutor Mentoring Program that provides a structured path for growth, ensuring that our tutors feel supported and valued. This program not only helps in professional development, but it also fosters a strong sense of community among our team.

Additionally, I am pleased to continue hosting our Tutor Chats once a month. These gatherings are more than just meetings.

Tutor Chats are a space for open dialogue, sharing ideas, answering questions and celebrating the success of our tutors and learners. It's an opportunity for us to come together, share experiences, and continue to build the supportive network that is so vital to our mission.

As a nonprofit organization, our ability to continue providing high-quality programs and support relies heavily on the generosity of our volunteers and the community. Your support plays a crucial role in enabling us to sustain and expand our initiatives, whether through financial contributions, volunteering, or advocating for our cause, each effort helps us continue our important work.

I am deeply grateful for the commitment and enthusiasm of our supporters. Your involvement and contributions make a tangible difference in the lives of those we serve. Together we can continue to make a significant impact and foster a community where literacy thrives.

[www.LiteracyChangesLives.org](http://www.LiteracyChangesLives.org)



Tutor Dody Richardson volunteered outside the William H. Jervy, Jr. Venice Library for an hour on a hot day in September to tell library patrons about Literacy Volunteers and sign up new volunteers. We have permission to do this at the North Port Library. If you'd like to volunteer, please email Karen at [north.port.literacy@gmail.com](mailto:north.port.literacy@gmail.com), and she'll provide you with materials.

### *Part Three: A final Check-in with Tutors/Instructors and Learners in this Series*

Over nearly a year, we have shared the journeys of three new tutors and their learners. Their involvement in tutoring and being a class instructor are representative of the delights and challenges of this experience.



Tutor Glen Peterson and Learner Danielis Garcia worked together for many months. Danielis was an eager student and made steady progress. She yearned to increase her lessons to two times a week. Glen was not able to consistently meet this request. Danielis became aware of classes offered at the North Port Library by LVSSC and joined a class there in addition to her one-on-one tutoring with Glen. Over time, her employment changed and created a conflict with her scheduled tutoring sessions and class in North Port.

Hopefully, Danielis has gained enough English to continue learning on her own, possibly through her job or in social situations with English-speaking neighbors and new acquaintances.

Aware of the extensive need for class instructors in our program at the North Port Library, Pam Zulauf created a class for English language learners at the beginning of their journey to learn English. Her familiarity with Spanish led her to create a class for Spanish speakers.



While several students attended class consistently, many did not and she found this frustrating. Being familiar with Spanish herself she often explained and instructed in Spanish. Over the duration of this class, she became more and more aware of the benefits of a full immersion program as a means of English instruction.

Pam's first class has concluded. She shares that she learned a lot and is eager to bring her new approaches and a new class textbook into her second class of beginning English language learners. This time her class is open to all beginners. She has four students returning from her first class and many new learners. The class is composed of students from Ukraine, Russia, Columbia, Cuba and Haiti. It is her hope that this will create an even richer learning experience and a more dynamic cultural environment. Her class that started in September and will conclude in early May and is full.



Dell Rubin-Smithern, President of Literacy Volunteers of South Sarasota County, recently had an opportunity to observe Rich Ames, our third tutor/class instructor whose participation in the program we have been following. Dell provides her observer's perspective below.

"I was impressed with the progress Genesis has made with her English lessons. Rich Ames, who conducts sessions twice a week at the Venice library, is exceptionally gifted in creating engaging and effective lessons. These sessions are conducted almost entirely in English, allowing Genesis to immerse herself fully in the language.

*Continued on page 8.*

## *English is a Gift by Rita Rikka-Williams*

With my long blonde braids tightly twisted by my nervous mother, I bravely entered the first day of Kindergarten in New Jersey wearing a gently used plaid dress and red shoes. I spoke no English. The ride on the school bus was long, but I was very excited! I was going to American school, finally! I had already been enrolled in the Estonian Saturday school that was created by the Estonian immigrant community in Lakewood, New Jersey. We learned Estonian history, and we learned to read Estonian poetry. We danced traditional dances and sang Estonian songs. We ate Estonian food for lunch. I wanted to be an American!

Rita Rikka  
Age 10



I was not allowed to speak English at home, strictly only Estonian. My parents had escaped the Communists and the Nazis and came to America as refugees with the promise of a better life. They suffered in the displaced people's camps until they were able to come to the United States with the hope of hard work and freedom. However, they fiercely held on to their culture in their new country with a strong sense of pride and the hope that their country would one day be free.

As I entered the Spruce Street School, it was as if I was coming into a combination of a church, Disney World, toy store and a new planet. My teacher, Mrs. Wright, welcomed me with the kindest face and sweet words. She smelled wonderful. Sitting at the little tables with other children, I began my journey to learn English and become an American. Mrs. Wright took very good care of me, and the English language came easily.

At that point I knew I wanted to become a teacher. It was a magic world with lots of books, things to write and so much to learn. School was a place of endless possibilities. School became a very sacred place for me. There was a lot of stress at home as my parents had to adjust to a new life after much suffering. Imagine having to leave your home with just a suitcase, not knowing if you would ever be able to come home again. So the refugees banded together in their community and upheld their culture while trying to survive with little language skills and trying to provide for their families.

Learning English was a special gift for me. I learned, I loved school, and I became a teacher at a young age. I remember teaching my grandmother the English that I learned in school, and we watched television shows to help her pronounce words and read movie magazines aloud to practice English. We went to the A&P grocery store, and I encouraged her to speak English to everyone.

*Continued on page 8.*

## Meet a LVSSC Volunteer: Carolyn Pearce



Volunteers are what make our organization thrive. We have many tasks for volunteers to undertake as we work toward our mission of bringing literacy to people in our region. It is important to recognize the individual talents of our volunteers and thank them when at all possible. In this issue, we thank our dedicated volunteer, Carolyn Pearce.

She comes to Florida via a storied career at Proctor and Gamble in Ohio, and she is originally from West Virginia. As a systems analyst and manager she acquired many skills as she taught COBAL programming and loved working to recruit people to work at Proctor and Gamble.

Upon retirement and living in Venice, she sought opportunities to volunteer. Spying an article in the local newspaper (*The Venice Gondolier*) asking for volunteers to teach English she replied. And the rest is history.

Carolyn began her volunteer career with Literacy Volunteers by first taking part in training (twice!) and then working to find a learner to teach, which she did. As she tells her story, she is very animated and excited about the work that she is doing with her learner. It's not that she is just teaching reading or writing. Carolyn is involved in her learner's life, helping her navigate things like job interviews and the needs of her child. She buys books to use in her lessons and makes sure that her learner's little girl gets books to add to her home library. She purchases little gifts for her learner to make things more enjoyable. Many field trips are taken and celebrations are had. She arranged for her learner to become a volunteer at a local civic organization for further language immersion and job experience for her resume.

According to Carolyn: "I think that we should all give back. I enjoy the opportunity to help immigrants reach their goals."

Carolyn became a trainer of tutors this year, using her skills as a manager and her enthusiasm as a tutor to educate and inspire future tutors. She stated that Trish Roberts and Sue Spayd inspired her as tutor trainers when she took their classes. They motivated her as a volunteer.

Carolyn has now volunteered as a tutor trainer and administrator in creating two-day trainings for new tutors this year. She spends many hours e-mailing prospective tutors and following-up on questions and concerns. She arranges for classroom space for meetings. She makes copies for tutor folders, she makes lists. She makes things run. And all with a smile and a positive attitude.

Carolyn brings much enthusiasm and personal stories to her tutor training sessions. With so much energy, she makes people want to become tutors.

Carolyn's "Blue Sky dream" is for LVSSC to have its own facility with rooms for tutoring and classroom space. If energy and enthusiasm were able to give us this dream, then Carolyn would have already made this happen.

A big thank-you to a very dedicated volunteer, Carolyn Pearce!

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**Help Wanted!** Like the US Marines, the LVSSC Training Team is looking for a few good men or women to join our ranks. We provide the preparation for new volunteers to become one-to-one tutors and/or classroom instructors. The qualifications for trainers are simple--at least six months experience as a tutor and a willingness to teach a class at least once a year! No prior teaching experience is required. For more information, contact Carolyn Pearce (Carolyn.s.pearce@gmail.com).

## Tutor Training Graduates

### May 2024 Tutor Training Class



### August 2024 Tutor Training Class



### September 2024 Tutor Training Class



## City of North Port Launches new Program to Assist Non-Profits

The City of North Port recently launched the NP<sup>2</sup> (North Port Non-Profits United) program, or “NP squared,” an initiative to foster collaboration between municipal government and local non-profits to better serve North Port residents. The program’s primary objective is to assist non-profits by providing support that will continue to enhance and expand their mission.

We applied for NP<sup>2</sup> support in the form of a new high-end laptop to help improve the information we use to guide our student’s progress. We were selected as one of the first twelve recipients of NP<sup>2</sup> based on our potential to help many new residents improve their employability skills. This consideration takes on particular significance since North Port is now the second fastest growing city in the United States!

On August 28, Erin Elsenheimer, a member of the City Staff, delivered our new Dell computer. She handed it off to Serhii Horevyi, who has been tasked with building various data sets that we can use to identify those students that are making sufficient English learning progress to qualify for job seeking and advancement support in the North Port area.



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## Ruth Colvin, Founder of Literacy Volunteers of America



On August 18, 2024, a very important literacy pioneer and hero died at the age of 107. If we had been lucky enough to meet Ruth Colvin, we would have been honored to speak with someone who spent most of her life working as a literacy superstar, but not seeking celebrity or recognition. We would have been inspired and motivated to continue her work with joy.

Ruth Colvin did not have a background in education but she saw in Syracuse, NY, that the number of illiterate people was astronomical. She wanted to do something about it. She said, “Don’t equate ignorance with illiteracy.”

She began classes in her basement and used an old refrigerator to hold books and papers. She recruited people from her church to become tutors. Her group started as Literacy Volunteers of Greater Syracuse in 1962, became Literacy Volunteers of America in 1972, and then merged with Laubach Literacy International to become ProLiteracy in 2002.

She said: “Teaching literacy isn’t just about giving people an important skill, it’s about breaking down racial, cultural and educational barriers. Bringing people together can change attitudes. It’s like dropping a pebble in a pond. Once you do it, the ripples go on and on.”

Ruth said, “For most of us, our heritage comes from someplace else. My grandmother came from Sweden and someone taught her English. I can pay that back by teaching someone else.”

Let’s embrace the work that Ruth Colvin did and believe that each of us has the responsibility of having a strong sense of respect and a strong social conscience to help to make our world a better place. Sharing the knowledge that we have with a person: one word, one sentence, one book, one shared experience and one smile can light up someone’s life and give them hope.

### ***Part Three: A final Check-in with Tutors/Instructors and Learners - Continued***

“Rich Ames approach includes having Genesis read aloud and discuss a range of topics, which enhances her confidence and fluency. The lessons are thoughtfully designed, incorporating interesting articles for homework, and encouraging Genesis to write about her personal experiences in English. This method not only improves her reading and writing skills but also keeps her engaged and motivated.

“Rich, occasionally uses Spanish translations to clarify challenging words, but the primary focus remains on English. The sessions also address pronunciation and the idiosyncrasies of English, which are crucial for Genesis’s development.

“What stands out most is Rich Ames’ creativity and dedication. He consistently devises lessons that are both educational and stimulating, tailored to Genesis’s needs and interests. His ability to make learning enjoyable, coupled with Genesis’s openness and sense of humor, creates a dynamic and productive learning environment.

“It is evident that Genesis’s progress is a testament to her hard work and her tutor’s exceptional skill.”

The need for tutors and class instructors is great. Our next training session will be held on Nov.12 and 15. Contact Karen at the Literacy Office at the North Port Library or Peter at the Literacy Office at the Venice Library if you are interested in helping one or more than one adult learn English. If there are any new or current tutors and class instructors interested in creating a class or small group, please contact Karen and Peter as well. The overall commitment is about 3-5 hours a week and the rewards are without measure.

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### ***English is a Gift by Rita Rikka-Williams - Continued***

The gift of English allowed me to earn many degrees and enjoy a long career as an art teacher. The gift of English allowed me to write and create many grant applications that were awarded to my schools and allowed my students to broaden their horizons. Having lived the immigrant experience gave me the insight and understanding needed to work with students whose parents did not speak English.

When I retired and moved full-time to Venice, I searched for volunteer situations that would allow me to continue teaching in some way. The Literacy Volunteers of South Sarasota County gave me some necessary training, access to materials for teaching. and a wonderful student from Columbia named Tania.

The English that my teachers gifted me with at a young age has given me the opportunity to give this gift to my student. At each weekly session, we unwrap more of the English language, and I am amazed at the motivation and desire to learn that Tania has. Since coming to the United States in 2023, she has worked from having no English ability to being able to converse fluently, read a best-selling novel and write an essay with ease.

So consider the idea of English being a gift. Not to be taken for granted. Not to be ignored. But to be shared and celebrated with amazement with those who want to learn. (Now where did I put my confetti cannon?)



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A sincere thank you to everyone who has made any type of donation to LVSSC. Every contribution helps to fund all aspects of our program including instructional materials and Coordinator's wages.

## Literacy Volunteers of South Sarasota County

[www.LiteracyChangesLives.org](http://www.LiteracyChangesLives.org)

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