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Putting Women at the Center: Sustaining a Woman-centered Literacy Program

Betsy Bowen



For nineteen years, Mercy Learning Center, a community-based literacy organization, has provided basic literacy instruction to low-income women in Bridgeport, Connecticut. During that time the Center has grown from three students and two tutors to 450 students, 155 tutors, and five full-time teachers. This growth has been affected by changes in welfare regulations and increased immigration. Using what it describes as a “holistic approach within a compassionate, supportive community,” the Center provides instruction that goes beyond the usual boundaries of basic literacy. With its expansive definition of basic literacy, Mercy Learning Center’s experience offers a model for sustaining a woman-centered community literacy program through nearly two decades of changing political conditions and educational needs.

In September 1987, Mercy Learning Center opened in Bridgeport, Connecticut, with three students and two tutors. Tutoring sessions were held in a borrowed classroom of a local community center. Now, in 2006, 450 women come each week for classes or tutoring sessions at the Center’s new home, a spacious, three-story building. This year, the Center’s professional staff teach daily classes in ESL, Adult Basic Education (ABE), and GED preparation. One hundred and fifty-five volunteer tutors drawn from throughout Fairfield County meet students for individualized tutoring twice a week. Another 140 volunteers support the Center outside the classroom. Some students attend enrichment classes in computer skills or sewing; some participate in workshops on job interviews or domestic violence. Over the past nineteen years, much has changed—the student population, the staff, the curriculum, even the motto of the Center. Its mission, however, has remained the same: to provide “basic literacy skills training using a holistic approach within a compassionate, supportive community to low-income women without regard for race, religion, color, or creed” (MLC Annual Report, 2003–04). The Center’s expansive view of basic literacy has helped it respond to the changing needs and demographics of its community.

My own experience with Mercy Learning Center began in 1994 when I started teaching a small creative writing class there. For the next four years, I met with small groups of women to write poems, stories, and letters. At one point, I was away from the Center for several years, preoccupied with family and professional responsibilities. When I returned to the Center last fall, I was struck by the changes. Some were obvious: more students, a number wearing hijab; more tutors; more languages spoken. A learning specialist and a social worker had been added to the staff. A GED class met every day and two rooms were now devoted to childcare. Even small changes—such as



the ID badges for students, tutors, and staff—revealed that the Center had changed in the years that I had been away.

The period of the Center's growth roughly parallels our field's interest in community literacy. Certainly, research on adult literacy predates the late 1980s (see, for example, Ong, Resnick and Resnick, Scribner, and perhaps most influentially, Freire). Still, it was probably Shirley Brice Heath's study of literate practices in the Piedmont Carolinas and the study of the Community Literacy Center in Pittsburgh by Wayne Peck and his colleagues that represent the starting points for widespread interest in literacy among those in composition and rhetoric. Now, little more than a decade after Peck's article was first published, interest in service learning and community literacy has become well established in composition studies. Evidence of that interest abounds: research collections, such as those by Linda Adler-Kassner, *et al.* and Ellen Cushman, *et al.*; textbooks, such as those by Paul Collins and Thomas Deans; and articles in journals published by the National Council of Teachers of English.

In the lead article of a special issue of *Language and Learning Across the Disciplines* on service learning, Charles Underwood, *et al.* argue that, as a field, we must now consider the long-term place of service learning in higher education. As they note, "service learning courses that come and go, or classes offered only occasionally, poorly serve the ongoing needs and interests of [community] organizations. The sustainability of service learning programs and activities sponsored by institutions of higher education are therefore of crucial significance" (21). Their analysis focuses on factors in higher education—such as faculty rewards and definitions of research—that jeopardize the long-term health of service learning programs. To ensure long-term support, they note, service learning projects "must ultimately be established and perceived as central to the University's mission" (21).

While their analysis is helpful, it does not address the challenge of sustainability for community-based programs that operate independently of higher education. Some of the most interesting and valuable work in adult literacy is done through programs that have no affiliation with institutions of higher education. Instead, these programs are offered through national and local literacy programs, in workplaces and through unions, in prisons, in school-based adult education programs, and in the military. Mercy Learning Center is one of these independent, community-based adult literacy programs offering free instruction. Not part of a service learning program, Mercy Learning Center operates without university support or involvement. Instead, it is supported by grants and donations and staffed by professionals and volunteer tutors. While it lacks the rich intellectual resources and student volunteers that a university affiliation can provide, it is also free of the "external political pressures" (Underwood *et al.* 22) and the need to provide meaningful learning for college students.

Instead, the Center, like all programs that depend on volunteers, must recruit tutors and cultivate their satisfaction in their work. Much of this satisfaction comes from what Nel Noddings calls "reciprocity" in the tutoring relationship. Genuine reciprocity, she says, is "what the [person] cared-for gives to the relation either in direct response to the one-caring or in personal delight or in happy growth before her eyes" (74). But, as Brian White points out in his critique of Noddings' work, students with the greatest needs may in fact be least likely to offer the visible signs of response on which Noddings' concept of reciprocity depends. Such students, he notes, have been overcome by



“alienating and degrading myths” about their own inadequacy and may be unable to “reciprocate freely” (310), making teaching harder and less satisfying.

Sadly, White’s description of students who have been alienated from their own experience and voices applies to far too many women when they first come to literacy programs. As the first contact many students have with the Center, Jennie, the Center’s receptionist, is sensitive to the feelings of inadequacy that may deter women from seeking education. A bilingual speaker who grew up in Bridgeport, she understands the anxiety new students may feel. “We’ve had a lot of women on the phone,” she says. “Because of their age, they feel like they’re not worthy of learning the language...I just try to make them comfortable.” At least initially, tutors may find it difficult or unrewarding to work with students who have been so alienated from their own capacity to learn. Perhaps for that reason, Mercy Learning Center also cultivates volunteers’ feelings of satisfaction through activities such as the monthly in-service workshops that build tutors’ sense of expertise as well as social activities that develop camaraderie.

Another challenge is that women’s-only programs must pay special attention to the material conditions of students’ lives. For many women, concerns about childcare and personal safety are obstacles to seeking literacy instruction. One well established program, funded by the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (CCLOW), which began about the same time as Mercy Learning Center, has already stopped operating. To sustain such programs, we need to understand more about the challenges they face and the ways in which they have coped with those challenges. This analysis of Mercy Learning Center will attempt to account for the ability of this woman-centered community literacy organization to flourish for almost two decades.

Some of the most interesting and valuable work in adult literacy is done through programs that have no affiliation with institutions of higher education.

Since the Center both reflects and serves the community, the article begins by examining the community in which the Center is located. Demographic changes in Bridgeport have challenged the Center to reassess and expand its mission. The article then examines two particular challenges Mercy Learning Center has faced: the impact of changes in welfare legislation and the rise in immigration. I argue that the Center’s expansive notion of basic literacy has helped it respond effectively to these challenges. The article ends by identifying challenges that remain for Mercy Learning Center and other community-based literacy programs.

Socioeconomic Context of the Center

Mercy Learning Center’s work has been shaped by the needs of the community that surrounds it. Bridgeport is marked by conditions typical of aging industrial centers: poverty, ill health, low educational attainment, political patronage, and corruption. The need for literacy education in Bridgeport is acute. Thirty-five percent of Bridgeport’s 84,458 adults lacked a high school diploma in 2000. In fact, 15% report having less than a ninth grade education and 3% report not having completed any schooling at all (US Census 2000). While 29,560 adults lacked high school diplomas in 2000, only 295—or



1%—earned high school diplomas during the 2000–01 school year (Strategic School, Bridgeport 2001–02).

Bridgeport’s problems are made more conspicuous by the wealth that surrounds the city. Fairfield County is home to towns synonymous with wealth: Greenwich, New Canaan, Darien, Westport. Sheila Flinn,¹ the new volunteer coordinator at the Center, remarked recently that her hometown of Westport was just “twelve minutes away, but a world apart” from the neighborhood of the Center, a comment that exemplifies the profound social and economic gaps that characterize Connecticut. In a county that is largely white and affluent, much of Bridgeport is poor and dark-skinned. Twenty-one percent of adults in Bridgeport were born outside the United States (US Census 2000). The average household income in Bridgeport was \$24,920 in 2000, with 18% of the city’s population living below the poverty level (US Census 2000). More than 95% of students in Bridgeport’s public schools were eligible for free or reduced price lunches, a standard federal marker of poverty (Strategic School, Bridgeport, 2003–04). In neighboring Fairfield, by comparison, that figure is fewer than 5% (Strategic School, Fairfield).

In the census tract [09001070900] in which Mercy Learning Center is located, the situation is even more strained. In that small neighborhood, 24% of the population lives below the poverty level. More than 97% of students at Roosevelt Elementary School, across the street from the Center, are eligible for free or reduced price lunches. More than half the adult residents in the neighborhood—56%—have not completed high school. Sixteen percent of the adults say that they speak English “not well” or “not at all” (US Census 2000). Even these figures are likely to underreport the area’s needs since undocumented immigrants, who generally have limited income and education levels, are less likely than others to agree to participate in the Census, fearful of providing information that might jeopardize their stay in the US. With a population that is materially poor, the neighborhood around the Center is dense with social service agencies. Within blocks of Mercy Learning Center are Homes for the Brave, a shelter for homeless veterans; the Kennedy Center for the developmentally disabled; and Prospect House, which offers transitional housing for adults dealing with addiction. The only business that appears to be flourishing in a four-block radius is the funeral home.

But there is life and energy in the neighborhood too, evidence of successive waves of immigration. The “Iglesia Pentecostal, Fuente de Salvacion” and the Taíno Diner reflect the neighborhood’s Puerto Rican presence. Up Park Avenue, La Flor de Mexico and La Poblana provide Mexican immigrants with food, news, and music from home. Not far away, Nour Market caters to immigrants from Syria, the city’s newest large immigrant group.

The Center’s History and Mission

Since its inception, Mercy Learning Center has provided basic literacy instruction for women who were “unlikely to seek out traditional literacy programs” (Capital Campaign 2). In its early years, many students had significantly limited literacy skills, many of them reading at about the third or fourth grade level.² This focus on women with the greatest need for instruction is one of the features that have distinguished the Center and its mission from other local literacy providers. Other key features are its exclusive focus on women, its broad definition of basic literacy instruction, and, I believe, its underlying religious mission.



The Center was founded by two Sisters of Mercy who came to adult literacy after careers in elementary education. There they had seen mothers, often raising children on their own, who were unable to work effectively with schools or advocate for their children because of their own limited literacy skills. While the Center has always been non-sectarian, it was informed by its founders' special vow of service "to persons who are poor, sick and uneducated" (Sisters of Mercy) as well as by their years teaching elementary school in the inner city. In its early years, the Center was marked by the personality of these two sisters: earnest, orderly, and correct. The Center's current president, Jane Ferreira, also began her career as a religious sister, working with gang members in Los Angeles, with a Puerto Rican community in Ohio, and as associate chaplain at Yale University. Asked about her involvement with literacy, Jane says simply, "I work with the poor." Now a laywoman, Jane views her work in literacy as a continuation of her commitment to serve those in need.

Any discussion of religious expression in an academic context is, understandably, complicated. Religious language alienates some potential students and tutors while it sets others at ease. Moreover, public universities with interests in community literacy or service learning have, for good reasons, avoided projects with religious overtones. Recent federal preferences for "faith-based" programs have only increased that skepticism by seeming to align religious impulses with the economic and political status quo. Still, providing a context for literacy instruction in which students and staff feel comfortable in referring to religious faith has, I think, contributed to Mercy Learning Center's longevity. The freedom that participants feel to acknowledge what is, for many, an important part of their lives has distinguished it from other local literacy programs and, for some participants, added to the Center's appeal.

An essential characteristic of the Center—one that distinguishes it from literacy providers such as Literacy Volunteers of America—is its focus on women's literacy. In this respect, the Center addresses a need that extends well beyond Bridgeport. Nationally, millions of women lack the literacy skills they are likely to need in our text-dense society. The 2003 International Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey found that men in the United States scored fifteen points higher than women on the literacy scale ("Highlights"). More recently, the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) found that 14% of the entire population—approximately 30 million American adults—score below the basic level in their ability to understand written prose. These adults may be able to locate a single piece of information in a short article on a familiar topic, but they are unable to draw inferences or understand more complex texts. About 11% of women score at the below basic level (Kutner, Greenberg, and Baer 3–7). (While on average, women score slightly higher than men in document literacy, they lag behind men in quantitative literacy.)

Particularly in its early years, the Center's mission to serve women was sometimes conflated with a mission to serve mothers. As one fund-raising report notes, the Center's programs "focus particularly on mothers because children frequently become the next generation of low literacy-skilled people unless their homes become supportive of education and places where reading is nurtured" (MLC Capital Campaign). Throughout its first fifteen years, in fact, the motto of the Center was "educate a mother, educate a family." In this respect, the Center faced a danger that family literacy programs frequently face: defining a woman's literacy as being in service of her family's



literacy. As Else Auerbach points out, when literacy programs emphasize a woman's role as a model of literacy for her children, they risk an instrumentalist view of women, one that values a woman's literacy primarily for what it can do for others.

But the symbols of demure femininity at the Center—such as the pale pink walls or the stencils decorating the bathrooms—have always coexisted with a radical commitment to help women gain greater power and autonomy. Since its start, Mercy Learning Center has helped women define and reach their goals. A current brochure for the Center sums up its goals thusly:

At Mercy Learning Center women are...

- ENABLED to take charge of their lives and the lives of their children;
- EQUIPPED with the confidence to challenge the cycle of poverty;
- ENCOURAGED to obtain employment, earn a GED, get involved in their community and further their education;
- EDUCATED with a holistic approach to increase their literacy skills.

(MLC, "Educate")

In 2002, a subtle change was made in the motto to reflect its broad commitment to women. Rather than "educate a mother, educate a family," it became "educate a *woman*, educate a family"—a change of a single, but significant, word.

An apparent paradox throughout the Center's history has been its determination to provide "basic literacy instruction" and its commitment to offering courses that extend well beyond conventional notions of basic literacy. Whereas in public policy discussions, "basic literacy instruction" is often understood narrowly to mean preparing students for the literacy demands of entry-level jobs, at the Center the term includes a broader range of activity. Certainly, job preparation is part of Mercy Learning Center's mission, particularly now that students can rely only briefly on welfare, but the Center has recognized that its students' basic needs extend well beyond getting a job and a paycheck. The women who come to Mercy Learning Center need opportunities for creativity and self-expression as well as help in managing lives complicated by poverty and, frequently, poor health. Sheila Flinn, the volunteer coordinator, puts it this way: "We don't just teach them to read. We do have the whole life skills program. They can go in and cook, they can sew, they can kickbox. We have the social worker here. I think we kind of look at the whole picture, not just the literacy, which I really like, that whole." At the Jesuit university where I teach, we call this *cura personalis*, care for the whole person. At the Center, they call it a "holistic approach" to literacy, one that treats the mind as well as the body, both the individual and the situation in which she lives.

Obstacles to Literacy for Women

Staff at the Center recognize that women face special obstacles in seeking literacy instruction. These include the need for reliable and affordable childcare and transportation; the expectation that the family's needs take precedence over individual needs; fear of disapproval or even violence from male partners; resentment from friends and family members who fear that the learner will change; conflicts with culture and tradition; and, perhaps most important, lack of self esteem ("By Women" 2–6).

At Mercy Learning Center, tutors and professional staff speak often of the ob-



stacles that women face, particularly the responsibility to care for family members and the resistance of their partners. Leanne, a tutor at the Center for five years, described a student from Brazil who had been in the United States for a year and a half and spoke very little English; she therefore felt isolated and incompetent. This student's husband, Leanne said, spoke three languages and handled everything; whether intentionally or not, he kept his wife dependent on him. Recently, the student told Leanne that she had wanted to go to the corner store to buy something. She couldn't, she said, because she didn't know the values of American coins. Emptying coins out of her purse, Leanne explained them to the student. As she did this, Leanne said, "I'm saying to myself—to the husband—'Damn you. Damn you.'"

Mercy Learning Center is not alone in putting women's needs at the center of its work. Since 1994, ProLiteracy Worldwide, the largest non-profit organization for literacy, has sponsored Women in Literacy and its successor, Women in Action. Both programs have focused on the literacy needs of low-income women in the US. In Canada, the Canadian Council of Learning Opportunities for Women (CCLOW) took an explicitly feminist position in designing literacy programs. From 1979 to 2000, CCLOW sponsored what it described as "woman-positive" (Lloyd, Ennis, and Atkinson 14) literacy programs and feminist research on literacy. (For more on the work of CCLOW, see Lloyd; Lloyd, Ennis, and Atkinson.)

At Mercy Learning Center, until recently, only women could serve as literacy tutors; men, however, were permitted to tutor math. As one male math tutor observed, "so much more of [the student's] story is likely to come out" in literacy tutoring, particularly when students write about their lives. Since many students felt shame or had suffered because of the men in their lives, this seemed an appropriate policy. That policy meant, however, rejecting willing and skilled literacy tutors even as the need for tutors increased. In the past two years, men have begun to tutor both literacy and math.

Students' Changing Economic Needs

Over the past nineteen years, the student population at Mercy Learning Center has changed significantly, in part because of changing economic conditions. During its first decade, the student body of the Mercy Learning Center was largely American-born, African American and Hispanic, generally from Puerto Rico. Many received welfare benefits such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). Because recipients were eligible for support for extended periods, students who started with limited skills could study at the Mercy Learning Center for several years.

In 1996, following President Clinton's promise to "end welfare as we know it," welfare, including AFDC, was replaced by Temporary Assistance to Families in Need (TANF). TANF provides benefits for twenty-one months; after that, most recipients are expected to be self-supporting. For many adult literacy students, particularly those whom Mercy Learning Center originally served, developing enough literacy skills to earn a living wage takes far longer than twenty-one months. Melanie McNamara, an ABE teacher who has been involved with the Center for nine years, has seen the pressure the new regulations put on students. "When you recognize that many of these women dropped out of school perhaps after the eighth or ninth grade," she says, "and what we're hoping to replicate is four years of knowledge, and they want to do it in a year or two, and it's not going to happen. All of them intend to get a GED. Whether all



of them are going to be able to pass this more difficult GED test...” Her voice trails off, leaving the prospect of failure unspoken but clear.

Shortly after welfare regulations changed, one student wrote about her anxiety and her hope in a poem.

Donna’s Poem

I’m going to get myself a job.

I need one bad.

‘Cause, see, right now I’m on the State,

And, I just got 21 months to find work.

I want to take care of myself.

I believe in myself.

I’m a good person.

I take computers.

Sometimes I am the receptionist.

I want to go back into nursing—

Helping people is what I like.

I want a job.

I hope a job wants me, too.

For some students, attaining the skills they need within twenty-one months has been difficult—even impossible. Nationwide, their experience is not unusual. In a report based on data from the National Adult Literacy Survey, Paul Barton and Lynn Jenkins found that two-thirds of adults who received AFDC or public assistance scored in the lowest two literacy levels (4) and that short-term literacy programs have generally failed to help these adults (58). Having reached their twenty-one month limit, some of the Center’s students have dropped out of the program, sometimes cycling in and out of low-wage jobs because they have not yet attained the skills they need to retain them.

Moving Toward the GED

The need for greater economic security has motivated other students to seek the GED, or General Educational Development degree, hoping it will enable them to get a job that pays a living wage. In response, the Center started a daily GED class in 2003. Now students can stay at Mercy Learning Center to study for their GED rather than transfer to classes sponsored by the Bridgeport public school department. Last week the main message board announced that another student had passed the GED. She is the thirtieth to have done so since the GED class started.

The GED is, perhaps, the ultimate high-stakes test. For students at the Center, passing the GED means access to better-paying jobs and higher education as well as greater self-esteem. For Tasha, the student with whom I work, getting the GED will mean being eligible to train as an LPN and move out of her low-paying, tiring job as a nurse’s aide in a nursing home. Beyond that, she told me, the GED is a precious marker of self-esteem. Getting the GED, she said, “is one of the most important things in my life. I need it to better myself. I need it for myself and my children.”



It is understandable, then, if teachers “teach to the test,” at least at the GED level. And yet, this strategy creates problems as it does in K–12 schools, where high–stakes testing shapes the curriculum and important skills and experiences may be squeezed out of the curriculum if they are not required for the test. Moreover, the test may determine not only what is taught but how and in what order. As a writing teacher, I was surprised to find Steck–Vaughn’s *GED: Language Arts, Writing* book begins with lessons on subordinating and coordinating conjunctions and moves on to comma splice and dangling modifier lessons—all important, no doubt, but not an introduction to writing I would normally choose. Because the textbooks are so closely aligned with the GED tests, the test drives the curriculum. While the GED includes a short essay, it is often defined and taught as a formulaic five–paragraph theme (Gillespie 25–26). As a result, Gillespie points out, students who pass the GED may still be unprepared for the writing demands they will face as they move on to community colleges.

It is tempting to disparage the rigidity of the GED curriculum and see it as depriving students of opportunities to make meaningful choices about their own learning. But for women like Tasha, the GED *is* a meaningful choice. A curriculum that prepares them for the GED is one that enables them to exercise their autonomy. Jeffrey Grabill speaks of tensions in the adult literacy curriculum:

What for me is a classroom that demonstrates a functional view of literacy overdetermined by assessment practices with little clear connection to literate practices beyond exams is for [these students] just what they wanted and needed. I see a limited and limiting set of literacies. The students, in contrast, see a type of liberation, or at least some satisfaction. (43)

Even with the current emphasis on the GED and academic preparation, the Center continues in its commitment to equip women “to challenge the cycle of poverty.” During a seven–week series of workshops, for instance, women considered the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. One woman, whose asthma had been worsened by poor housing conditions, said she learned how to advocate for herself with the housing authority. Before the workshops, she said, “I didn’t know there was someone I could actually call. I didn’t even know I had a voice. Now I know I do, and I’m important.” (MLC, *Chrysanthemum* 1). In other workshops, women have discussed health care, domestic violence, and advocacy in their children’s schools.

Addressing Immigrant Students’ Needs

A second change in the curriculum—the addition of an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) class—reflects another change in the Center’s student population. Ten years ago, few of the Center’s students were immigrants, while today many are. The growth in the immigrant student population has been dramatic. In 1994–95, the Center served 141 students, of whom 56% were African American, 28% Hispanic, 13% white, and 2% “other” (MLC Annual Report 1994–95). (In these figures and throughout, I have used the categories for analysis used in the original documents.) In 2005–06, by contrast, only 12% of the 450 students identified themselves as Black/African American, while 62% were Hispanic, many of the whom were recent immigrants from Mexico and Central America. Of the Center’s other students during this same time



period, 15% were Black/Non-African American (from the Caribbean and Africa), 5% identified themselves as white, 4% as Middle Eastern, and 2% as Asian (*MLC Annual Report 2005-06*). Altogether, the Center's students come from fifty-six countries and speak twenty-nine languages—from Albanian to Haitian Creole.

The needs of these immigrant students are varied. Some are literate in their own languages and simply need to learn English. Others have limited literacy in their native language and now must develop language and literacy skills simultaneously, a much more arduous task. The growth in the number of Hispanic students is particularly significant. Nationally, literacy skills among Hispanic adults declined significantly between 1992 and 2003, with 44% of all Hispanic adults now scoring in the below basic level for prose literacy on the NAAL. In contrast, by 1992 that figure was only 35%

(Kutner, Greenberg, and Baer 8).

The Center has seen a comparable increase in the number of Spanish-speaking students with significant literacy needs.

Expanding to serve English language learners has presented some problems for the Center. The original intention was to serve non-native speakers of

As concerns about national security have increased in the United States since September 11, 2001, these women face significant problems finding housing, health care, and work.

English whose needs could not be served elsewhere, either because their level of literacy was too low for traditional ESOL programs or personal difficulties made conventional programs too daunting to them. The Center's ESOL tutoring has attracted a number of students from Syria and other Middle Eastern countries who prefer to take classes without men. Many of these women, however, are already literate in one language and better off financially than the Center's other students. Other ESOL programs, both public and private, are available to them.

Arlene Fingeret, former director of Literacy South, noted that literacy providers are pressured to direct literacy services to those with higher skills. "We must," she said, "remain committed to working with those adults who have the most minimal skills" (Fingeret). For that reason, next year, Mercy Learning Center will return to its original mission: providing ESOL instruction and serving women who face the double burden of limited English and low literacy. These are women like Anna, who came to the United States from Ghana three years ago with limited English and literacy skills. For three years, Anna worked the second shift at her job so that she could take classes at the Mercy Learning Center in the mornings. Recently, she passed the GED test.

A more radical challenge has been the undocumented status of many of the immigrant students. As concerns about national security have increased in the United States since September 11, 2001, these women face significant problems finding housing, health care, and work. The addition of a part-time social worker has allowed the Center to address some of these women's needs. Alexandra Clough's office is on the third floor of the Center. Tucked between two classrooms, her office is located off a small "meditation room" used for individual conferences or a moment of private time. In her small office, Alexandra meets with women who need help with problems outside the classroom. Asked what brings women in, Alexandra replies immediately: "Immi-



gration is huge. I deal with it every day.” She had just gotten off the phone, she says, with a lawyer at the International Institute, an agency that provides legal and social assistance to immigrants.

At a recent workshop for tutors, Renee Redman, director of immigration counseling at the International Institute, explained the situation that immigrant students face. Those who are already have “lawful permanent resident” status (popularly known as a “green card”) must be able to speak, read, and write English as well as pass a citizenship test and demonstrate “good moral character” in order to attain citizenship. Undocumented asylum seekers, she said, currently face about a four-year wait to attain “lawful permanent resident” status. Students who have entered the country illegally—a status known as EWI, or “entry without inspection”—face the greatest restrictions. Ineligible to work or obtain most social services, they are especially vulnerable. Fearful of deportation, she said, some endure domestic violence or abusive working conditions rather than seek help from the police or social service agencies.

I had expected that working with undocumented immigrants might pose ethical or legal problems for the Center. To my surprise, however, that seems not to be the case. The Center’s policy is clear: it is “open to any women in need of education below the high school level” (Ferreira). In keeping with that policy, it does not require information about immigration status when students enroll at the Center. Incoming students are asked where they were born, but not about their immigration status. Those who ask for help with matters related to immigration are referred to the International Institute.

Remaining Challenges

Even after nineteen years, Mercy Learning Center faces significant challenges, particularly finding adequate funding and space. Nationally, funding for adult education is in jeopardy. The proposed federal budget for 2006 calls for a 64% reduction in funds for adult and vocational education (“Proposed Budget”). The White House Office of Management and Budget maintains that “decades of increasing federal investment, and various attempts at program reform, have produced little or no evidence that the Department’s vocational education programs lead to improved outcomes” (Office of Management and Budget). That claim might surprise women like Martine, who passed her GED, and Anita, who attained US citizenship after studying at Mercy Learning Center this year.

While federal funding is being cut, the need for literacy instruction is growing. Nationally, 92 million American adults were enrolled in adult education programs of some kind in 2000–01 (Kim, Hegendorn, Williamson, and Chapman 8). At Mercy Learning Center, the number of tutored students rose 56% between 2002–03 and 2003–04 alone. Tutors and students now have to double up in cubicles, the Music/Drama room has been converted into an ESOL classroom, and the tutorial classroom has been pressed into service as the GED classroom. The Center has nearly exceeded the capacity of its third home. Soon the staff may need to turn away women interested in changing their lives through improving their literacy.

That would be a loss for women like Tasha. In her educational autobiography for the Center, Tasha wrote about her decision to seek literacy instruction: “This is what brought me to the steps of Mercy Learning Center: Determination and commitment to myself and then for my three children.” There are many women like Tasha who have



struggled to get the education they missed in school. When we understand how community literacy programs endure, we are better able to help these learners.³

End Notes

¹ Throughout this article, the names of students and tutors at Mercy Learning Center have been replaced with pseudonyms they selected. Professional staff members have chosen to be identified by name.

² Like many literacy programs, the Center generally avoids talking about adults' literacy in terms of grade levels. Equating adults' skills with elementary school grades can humiliate learners and give a misleading conception of their knowledge. More often terms such as ABE, for Adult Basic Education, are used. For a more precise and non-judgmental assessment, scores on the CASAS test—the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System—are used. At the national level, adult literacy scores are usually represented as Levels 1 through 5 using the non-descriptive terms of the National Adult Literacy Survey (1992) and the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (2003).

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