

BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS TO LITERACY

Last fall, *Prairie Post* reporter Susan Quinlan was awarded the inaugural Peter Gzowski Life Literacy Fellowship from ABC Life Literacy Canada. With that began Quinlan's work on this series focussing on the Mennonite community in Southern Alberta and the struggle its members face in acquiring literacy. The *Prairie Post* is proud to present these stories. We hope they shed some light on the challenges this unique community faces.

Along the path to literacy ...

STORY AND PHOTOS BY SUSAN QUINLAN

Imagine arriving to take up residence in the country your parents or grandparents were born in, having heard stories about its mountains, prairies and big blue skies, and its polite and friendly people. Your expectations are high, excitement palpable, but at the same time you're gripped with anxiety knowing once you cross the border you'll be isolated, because of the language you speak.

You're entering a predominantly English-speaking region while you're a Mennonite whose first language is

Low German, a blend of German and Dutch. Although you may have a relative living in the southern Alberta town you're headed for, you're an adult with a family concerned about burdening that relative who will have to serve as your translator. As well, you're not looking forward to the inevitable loss of privacy that will bring. You'll need that translator when you apply for work, set up a bank account, pay a visit to your new doctor, even when you shop for groceries.

You've therefore sacrificed your independence to some extent with this move to Canada from Mexico, until you acquire the language and get on with the life you imagined you and your family would have.

For some, the challenge of acquiring English literacy goes on for years, with most agreeing that learning to speak is relatively easy, when compared with the challenge of learning to read and write. For most, those latter skills will take years to perfect.



Judy Fehr prepares to do some baking, as she can now read recipes written in English. A Low German speaking Mennonite, Judy acquired the ability to speak English after living in Canada for a couple of years. However, the ability to read and write has proven to be more of a challenge, just as it has for others whose first language is not English.

Judy Fehr, 50, a Low German speaking Mennonite (LGM), easily recalls the challenges she has navigated and continues to face in acquiring literacy, even though she and her husband, Abe, arrived in southern Alberta in 1981.

Judy shakes her head as she recalls an exchange that occurred shortly after she and Abe arrived, on the farm where Abe had been hired to work.

"I spoke no English when we got here. The first time I talked to Abe's boss I was so overwhelmed. The language was so much more difficult to learn than I thought it would be and I had myself convinced I couldn't understand anything."

Although a friendly neighbour took it upon herself to give Judy English lessons, her approach wasn't working.

"All the words sounded the same ... that first year, I was just so depressed."

During their first Canadian winter the isolation Judy felt on the farm, coupled with less than adequate living conditions, left Judy feeling homesick and severely depressed, with concerns about acquiring literacy far down on a growing list of disappointments.

"I even dreamed about it, going back home and sitting in the sunshine, eating corn tortillas. I'd wake up and my mouth would be watering ... We had seen snow before, but not like here. Those old tall windows with the plastic on them rattled constantly. I'd look out and there was snow everywhere. Abe would go out to milk and I was so afraid he'd disappear."

Trips to the doctor were the worst, says Judy. No one wants to share private concerns with others, but with no command of the language, she had no choice.

"When I had my daughter, we were in the hospital and I kept telling the nurses it was time, but they couldn't understand. They pushed the bed halfway out the door and I kept telling them I couldn't wait, then they finally pushed me back in." Her daughter, Tina, arrived seconds later.

Near the end of that first winter, the Fehrs' luck began to change when they moved to another southern Alberta town. Judy made friends with a fellow LGM and as well, her boys entered school and began picking up the language and speaking it at home.

"I was able to pick up a word here and there, and I used to watch a bit of television..." particularly sitcoms where dialogue and action are closely linked, then finally, her vocabulary began to expand.

"We also met this Low German-speaking couple that would only speak English when we visited, so that pushed me to learn. If we couldn't understand they'd tell us the word in German. You can understand English before you can speak it, but you must speak it to know it."

Formal language training for Judy didn't begin until years after she arrived, when in 2005 time and circumstance configured in such a way that she was able to attend English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. That led to her securing a job as a Kindergarten aide where she worked with Low German-speaking youngsters, but when the instructor found out Judy wanted to take classes as well she arranged for her to attend.

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Mennonites share their literacy stories

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Now a grandmother of 14 and with two of her eight children having graduated university, Judy recently decided it was time to improve her ability to read and write English and is working with a language tutor once a week. By her own estimation, she reads and writes at about a Grade 2 level, but to speak with Judy, you wouldn't know English isn't her first language.

Meanwhile, Judy's career dream has always been to become a nurse, a profession she respects and to which she's well suited. However, funding she would use in support of her family while attending classes is no longer available, so she's unable to enter full-time study.

In looking back over the past 30 years and the effort she has made, Judy says acquiring literacy has been difficult, but she's succeeding and although Abe passed away in 2005, he made great strides.

"My advice to newcomers is to go to school right away and get the language. Abe went to school right away and used to tell other newcomers and me to learn the language. In time, I saw what he meant. He got his journeyman (wedding) ticket here and started his own business. We took out student loans to make it happen, but first he had to do his upgrading. All that work, and we also raised our family."

Mary Penner, 36, arrived in Canada with husband, Martin, and one of the six children they would eventually have, when the couple was 18 and 20, respectively.

As to Mary's experience, like many others in the LGM group, she acquired English literacy largely due to her strict work ethic and absolute determination. She eventually managed to juggle full-time literacy classes with managing her home and family, then put her newly-acquired education to work in an entrepreneurial endeavour.

"When we first got here, neither of us spoke any English," Mary says.

Perhaps as a result, in part, of the challenge that presented, the couple spent their first year saving enough money to return to Mexico and buy a small farm. After four years of trying to make a go of it, they packed that venture in and returned to Canada, this time with renewed determination to succeed.

Another year would pass before Mary went to literacy classes, which turned out to be an experience that differed sharply from the education she and others received in Mexican colony schools.

"In Mexico you have very little education; only as much as a child gets here in two years."

As well, Mary was one of 70 students in a single classroom.

In colony schools, students enroll until age 12 and are managed by one and occasionally, but rarely, two teachers with no formal education or training, selected for that position by the colony's council.

"There was no opportunity to learn English there. To get the language here you constantly had to ask what words meant, and I still do that. It's very difficult, especially for people that are afraid to ask. And to speak, I never was able until I went to school here. You don't really know English until you speak it."

What stands in the way of many LGMs taking

language classes, says Mary, has to do with saving face. They don't want to mispronounce a word or select the wrong word, then have to endure the embarrassment.

That's why Mary initially resisted going to class and as well, thought she could acquire the language by sheer determination, as she could understand English, but not yet speak it.

"When I finally decided to go to school, it was as a 'favour' to a friend," she laughs, acknowledging how she again chose to preserve her self-esteem.

That friend had approached Mary and asked her to spread the word, the method by which all news travels in the LGM community, so others would attend an informal session about an upcoming language class.

"After that meeting I learned they needed a certain number of people to make the class go, so I signed up. Then I had to find a babysitter. I was one week in school and the sitter quit, but by then I liked the school."

Over the next several years, Mary would return to literacy classes periodically for

additional instruction.

"I used to be a home-stay mom all the time. It was very, very hard for me, to do my job at home with the kids and still go to school full-time, four days a week. It was a long day, but I loved it; I loved it. Now I think I almost do it all; I'm putting it all to work. I even know how to work on the computer. I hated math, but we had to do it and now I am using it every day. If it hadn't been for that school, how could I ever do all this?"

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Mary Penner, 36, and four of her six children enjoy a romp on the family's trampoline in Iron Springs. Following completion of a literacy program at the Taber and District Community Adult Learning Association, Penner felt confident enough to start her own home business and now has 50 women working under her.

A brief history of Mennonites

SOURCES:

Alberta Online Encyclopedia, (presented by the Heritage Community Foundation) - Mennonite Immigration into Alberta (<http://www.edukits.ca/multiculturalism/AMIndex.htm>)
Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online (<http://www.gameo.org>)

Ancestors of the Low German speaking Mennonites (LGMs) who now reside in southern Alberta originally came from Germany and Russia, to flee religious persecution.

Following a route that would take some to the northeastern United States and others to Ontario and Manitoba, further migration occurred when the Canadian west opened up following completion of the railroad.

By 1911, there were 1,500 LGMs in Alberta and by 1920, 15 settlements had begun throughout the province. Each was composed of a sect that followed pacifist ways and an agrarian lifestyle, and used technology to varying degrees.

In the 1920s, some of these Canadian LGMs became upset with the federal government, as they wanted to run their own schools and given their pacifist beliefs, wanted to be exempt from military service.

With encouragement from then Mexican President Álvaro Obregón Salido, who thought native Mexicans could benefit from the LGM's expertise in agriculture, thousands of LGMs left the prairies and settled in Mexico while others moved even further south.

LGM colonies in Mexico consisted then and continue today with a school at their centre, a bishop, elected for life by the congregation, and a *vorsteher* or business manager, who looks after the colony's finances with regard to purchasing the land upon which the sect lives. There's also a council of elders that make decisions for the colony and select the teacher for the school. Colony teachers have no formal training or credentials.

Family units within the colony each operate a small farm and each working member contributes to the family's purse.

The school curriculum consists of studying the Bible,

learning hymns in the German hymnal and studying the Catechism in preparation for adult baptism.

In their day-to-day lives this group speaks Low German — a blend of Dutch and German. In class, which children attend until age 12, students learn to read, write and speak High German, as the German language is thought to be next to Godliness. If the teacher has skill in basic arithmetic, that subject is also taught.

Migration of LGMs back to Canada from Mexico began during the 1950s and continues today because of Mexico's faltering economy, and as well because of the escalation in violence there, a direct result of the illegal drug trade.

The LGMs returning to Alberta and to other provinces are Canadian by descent, as at least one of their parents or grandparents was granted Canadian citizenship following the initial migration from Europe.

Learning the language presents many challenges

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"I'm not a quitter ... My husband didn't want me to go. He fixed the warm food, the house clean. I had to fight to go to school, first with myself then for me to keep going. Then Martin realized that if he did not let me go I would not become the person I was supposed to be. I understand if women don't want to go," given their responsibilities.

"I loved school; I really loved it, then I got a computer and my husband wanted me to start a home business."

Mary now sells Aroyss products, which range from clothing to personal care items and nutritional supplements, and she has about 50 women working under her.

"Each step was scary, but I just kept going."

If given the choice, Mary would still be taking language classes to further improve her reading and writing skills, but can't because the funding isn't there.

"If I was still funded I'd still be going to classes. I was completely set on that."

As to the future, schools is priority one for Mary and Martin's six children.

"I tell them Grade 12 is a must and that's what they all have to do."

Their oldest, John, 18, wants to be a mechanic while the second oldest, Martin, 16, wants to become a carpenter. And Mary suspects one of her daughters, Grace, 9, will likely teach.

"If that would be her dream, I would support her and if I have the money, I'll help her do that ... I would not have the life I have, without literacy."

As for new arrivals, Mary offers this advice.

"The first thing I tell people is go to school and get your language; you're going to need it. At least get a tutor ... A little more than two years ago, I would not have thought it was possible for me to start my own business, and now I have."

As to the most positive experience she has encountered since arriving in Canada, Mary responds with an example that relates to her acquiring the language.

"When I see the outreach for schooling, it gets to my heart because I know I was not comfortable speaking until I had the schooling. I didn't know there was so many good hearts out there, to get the Mennonites schooling."

Suzie Wolf, 36, arrived in Vauxhall from Chihuahua in 2004, with her two daughters, Jazmin, then 3 and Angelica, 13, in tow, and two married sisters in the region ready to lend a hand.

Among the main reasons Suzie lists for making the move north is securing a good education for her daughters. According to Suzie, there are good schools in some Mexican cities, but

because the cities are so dangerous, particularly for women, she did not want to put her children at risk.

"I want to support my daughters in college here. I'm not okay with my daughters having just high school. I want my daughters to dream, not just dream, but make their dreams come true.

"In Mexico I had a very good job," says Suzie, who worked as a Spanish tour guide, as well as a special needs assistant.

"When I arrived, I knew a few English words. Low German was my first language, then Spanish. We LGMs all face the same struggles; we definitely don't know how to communicate in English and you almost feel like building a wall around yourself."

Once Suzie and her girls had settled in, Jazmin started pre-Kindergarten and Suzie joined her.

"Jazmin started pre-K, so I started pre-K. She'd read to me, then I would read to her. That program was very strong with reading and rhyme, and I liked this way of learning the language. I encourage parents to learn along with their children."

Meanwhile, Angelica began school as well and that proved to be the experience that lit the fire under Suzie, to acquire the language as quickly as possible.

"One day the school called and said, 'your daughter walked away and has no permission to do so. She's sitting here now. Would you talk to her?'"

"I talked to her and asked her why she left. She said, 'I feel like crying, Mom, and I don't want to do this in school. Can I just come home and learn the English with you?' She broke down and cried her eyes out."

At that point, no one could understand Angelica, nor could the youngster understand her English-speaking peers.

"She felt she was not capable. She wanted to do it herself, but she had someone sitting with her all the time," making her feel incompetent and singled out.

"That's when I felt I had to do anything I could to help my daughter, so we began reading to each other. She would correct me and we'd sit and read together for one hour every day. That was the very best I ever did, to learn English. As a parent, that was a good thing. I was learning and growing with my children and that helped all of us."

Angelica has now graduated from high school and is working as an aide in a small rural school, to see if she would like to pursue a teaching career. Her determination reflects that of her mother's, as Suzie says she definitely made language acquisition a priority, realizing it was absolutely necessary for her to carve out a new life.

"I definitely wanted to be independent, like I had been (in Mexico). I did not depend on others to translate. I remember us going to the theatre (here) for a movie and I told my sister, I'll manage this on my own. I told her to go get some popcorn, then

I asked for two student tickets, two children and two seniors," Suzie says with a laugh, still a few decades away from the senior designation.

"My niece was standing at the side and listening, but did not interrupt or correct me. I made a lot of mistakes like that, but you learn. I was not scared and I knew that as soon as you lose the fear to say or do something wrong, you can go on. If you don't care even if you make mistakes, for me and for everyone, let that fear go. You have to face that fear and put it away."

"I'd send my sister away, so she would not hear me struggle and help. I needed to do it on my own. I wanted to be independent."

Like many other LGMs interviewed, Suzie recalled the experience of shopping in a Canadian grocery store as one of the most challenging tasks.

"I'd go to the store and I could not read any of the labels. I'd look at the pictures and I'd ask myself, 'does this look like cream for coffee?' Then I'd take it home and no, that wasn't it. It was very, very difficult."

"Other times I'd get to the cash register and they'd always ask me all these questions I didn't understand, and I'd always just smile and say 'no.' Then one day the girl at the till asked me all these questions and I kept saying 'no' until the end; then I said 'yes.' She ended up carrying out my little bag of groceries," Suzie chuckles.

"At first, when I walked into a grocery store I felt like putting a little house around me; I just smiled at people. That was my way of letting them know I was okay. Lots of LGMs do this."

"We're used to tiny grocery stores in Mexico, with one cream for the coffee and not so many salad dressings! We're lost here, completely lost. And if you don't read, you really don't know what you're buying."

Sometimes, Suzie says, she'd bring the empty container with her.

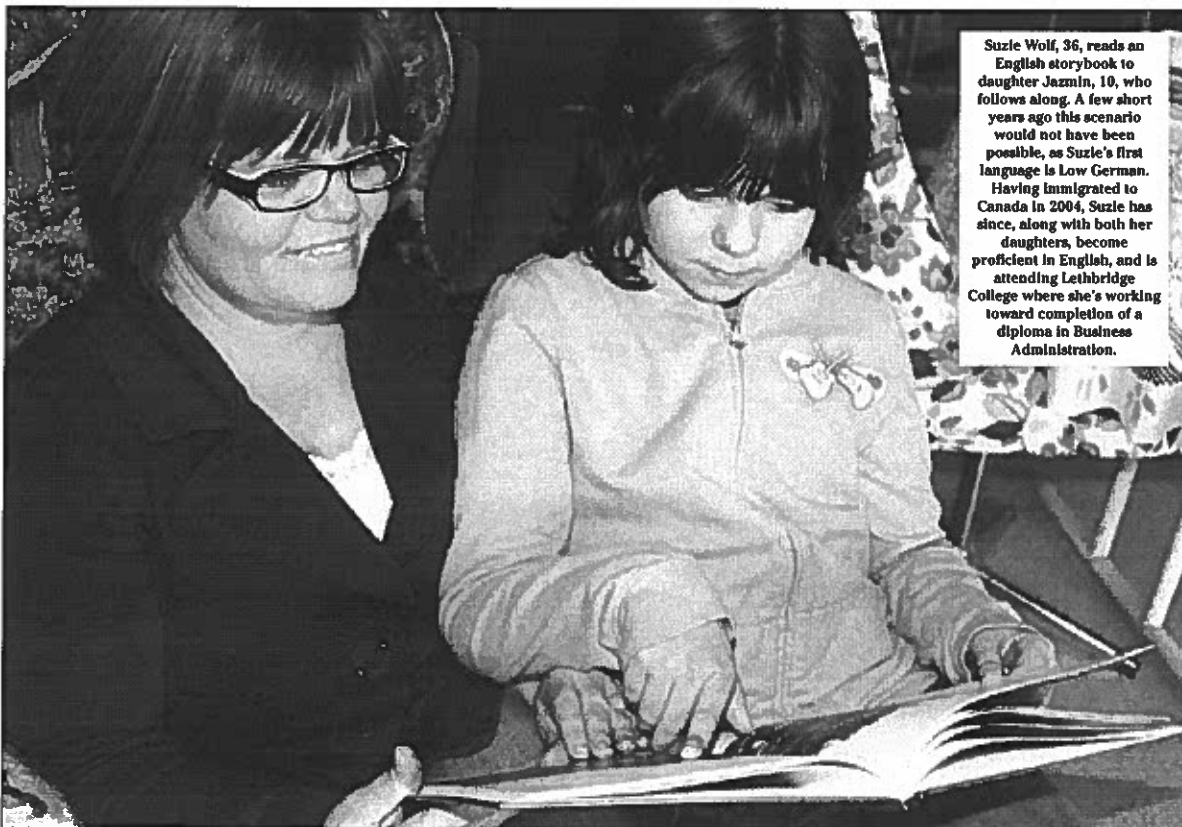
"You watch and you'll see. Lots of women have them in their purses, so they can look at the pictures."

Suzie was in southern Alberta for one year before she felt confident speaking the language, then after a second year, her living arrangements changed and she found herself in need of a full-time job to support herself and her girls.

"I was a self-confident person and knew I had potential, but didn't think I could get a job, then a lady at the local literacy association saw my application and I got a job in the ESL program working with a Low German speaking pre-Kindergarten girl. I worked three years as a special needs assistant."

The most challenging experience Suzie has had since arriving was getting that first job and stepping into a public school as staff.

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Suzie Wolf, 36, reads an English storybook to daughter Jazmin, 10, who follows along. A few short years ago this scenario would not have been possible, as Suzie's first language is Low German. Having immigrated to Canada in 2004, Suzie has since, along with both her daughters, become proficient in English, and is attending Lethbridge College where she's working toward completion of a diploma in Business Administration.

Breaking Down Barriers To Literacy

Finding success with literacy and in business

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"Here I was, supposed to help the child feel part of a community that I didn't even feel part of, but it was also the experience I learned the most from. It was so hard because I had been so self confident (in Mexico) then I had this language barrier that could not let me get the job done."

But acquire the language she did and at a remarkable rate, then moved on to further improve her literacy by taking ESL classes at Lethbridge College.

"I started college in January 2010, into the upgrading program. The instructors couldn't believe I had never studied English. I got the highest marks in the upgrading program that semester."

Although Suzie wishes she was still on campus, her studies there were derailed due to funding cuts. However, Suzie continues to take correspondence courses to improve her reading and writing skills, while working full-time.

"In September (2011) I'll return to school full-time for Business Administration.

"Financially, I have quite a bit of expenses, so I have to work to support my family. It'll take me longer (to get my diploma), but what I absolutely loved was the four months at Lethbridge College. Just to be a student and part of something that makes you more capable. I felt I was part of the college community. I loved it. It's the thing I most enjoyed in my life, but when you see the financial struggle behind it you have to make decisions that work for everyone in your family.

"Early on, I took an easy job for six weeks, sorting beans. I asked the boss, 'do you have any problem with immigrants?' and he said, 'I see us all as immigrants.' We all need to think about that.

"My world has gotten so much bigger thanks to literacy and I feel my daughters have a bright future ahead of them."

As for advice to Canadians in helping LGMs acquire literacy, Suzie suggests the following.

"Be patient. If we don't understand the first time, try again; we'll get it. We can sense if people want us to belong. Allow us to belong and feel part of the community. It takes effort. I personally feel that people here are very supportive, especially those at the Taber literacy association."

And Suzie's advice to new immigrants ...

"Don't draw back. I know you'll feel like hiding, but face the fear, challenge yourself. If you have to start from the ABCs, do that. Everybody has to start with the ABCs, even the professionals. You will progress, you just have to be willing to step down and start where you're at. It's one step at a time and you will move ahead."

Jake Hlebert, 28, arrived in southern Ontario from Mexico 18 years ago, along with his mom, dad, brothers and sisters. In keeping with what he explains is the Mennonite way, Hlebert has followed an entrepreneurial path and started his own business. He also brought his wife, Tina, and their family west to Alberta in 2005.

"Back when we first moved, my family spent the first few months in Ontario on welfare which devastated my dad."

However, the Hleberts soon found work on a farm with the older children helping the parents earn a living, demonstrating the work ethic Jake was raised with that influences his life to this day.

With the younger children enrolled in English-speaking schools, Jake spent about five years enduring bullying that at times was hard to take, and ESL classes that, although helpful, lasted only 20 minutes a day.

"I was here for two years and I still couldn't speak the language."

There were breaks during those years when Jake's parents could afford private school, but for the most part he wouldn't learn to read and write until he was an adult.

Halfway through Grade 8, he left school and went to work on a farm picking fruit and vegetables all hours of the day and night.

"That never bothered me. What bothered me was my inability to move forward."

At 17, the owner of that farm asked Jake to take over management of the crew.

"No problem supervising, but I had to get a chemical applicator's licence and I couldn't read or write."

However, Jake did have rudimentary literacy skills and managed to pass the exam, but more importantly, realized his need for a formal education which prompted him to begin study for the General Equivalency Diploma (GED).

"I took the supervisory job for a year and a half, then an opportunity came around to go into construction."

Again, Jake was asked if he wanted to move ahead, this time to enter the trades.

"I had a great teacher in construction; he had a great work ethic. He saw I wasn't just a labourer."

Eventually that boss convinced Jake it was in his own best interests to get his journeyman's ticket.

Unbeknownst to that employer, Jake had been preparing for the GED and at the age of 22, passed the exam.

"I was never prepared to do academics, because it runs against what I had been taught to believe," that farming was the most important job to undertake, according to scripture.

However, Jake had met his future wife, Tina, a Low German speaking Mennonite born and raised in southern Ontario and therefore educated in the Canadian school system.

"I had learned the basics of reading and writing as a farm worker and read at a Grade 4 level, but then Tina helped me fine-tune those skills. For the first time it opened my eyes, that some Mennonites were educated and not all were against education."

With his employer submitting the paperwork, so Jake could receive employment insurance while attending class, and also keeping track of Jake's hours, Jake was able to write the trade exam and receive his journeyman carpenter's ticket two years after that process began.

Now with 12 years in the industry, Jake is a general contractor with his own business and two full-time employees, building homes and other structures in southern Alberta.

Although his own experience in some Canadian schools was not always positive, Jake says the teacher he had at the Mexican colony was excellent, with an ability to identify and encourage a child's academic strengths and as well, to teach Biblical values.

"I can't say enough good about him."

It's likely that experience which prompted Jake and Tina to move west in 2005, because he says they saw value in the school system in southern Alberta.

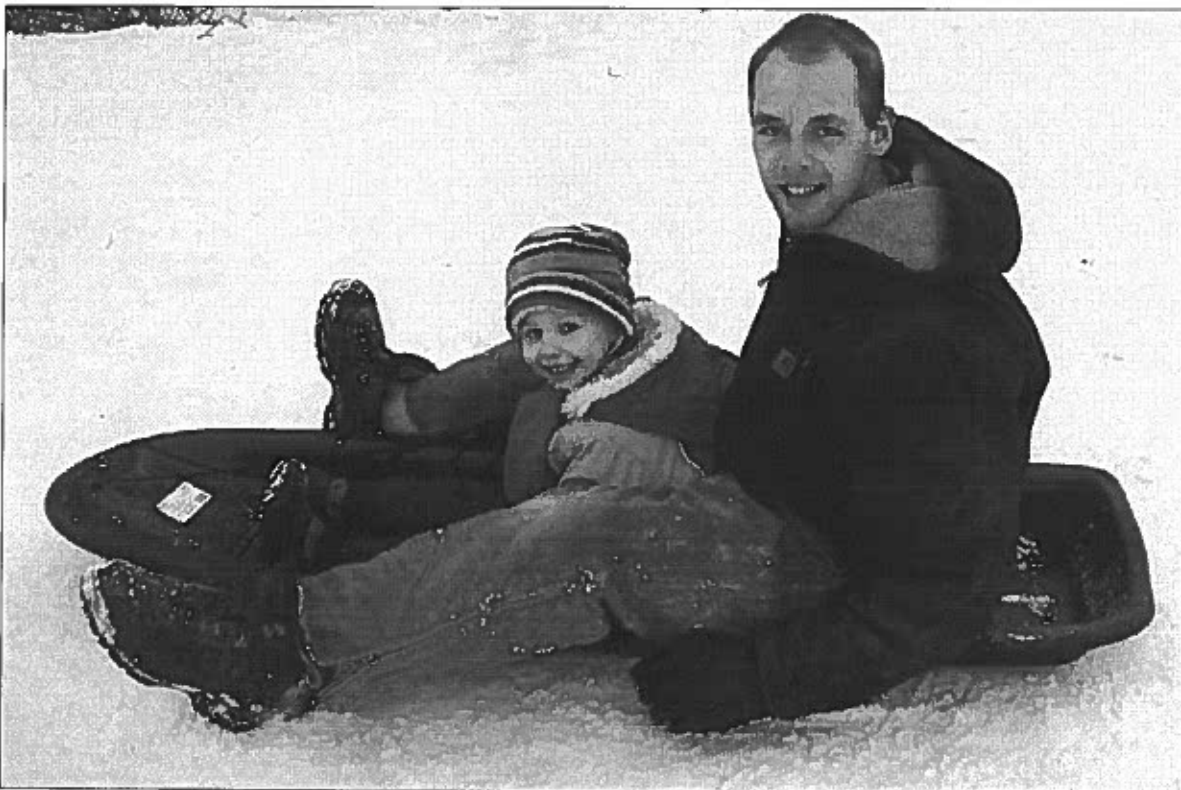
As for advice to newcomers, Jake has this to say ...

"If we've come to Canada because we want freedom, let's express appreciation for it; let's learn the language. Learn it well and do business here. In Mexico, everyone owns a business; why can't we bring that mentality here? Canada runs on the backbone of entrepreneurs."

And as to how Canadians can help newcomers with literacy ...

"Accept people for who they are. Don't take an opportunity away because of their language inability," but rather, encourage them to progress and you will no doubt be pleasantly surprised.

In next week's Prairie Post, Susan Quinlan talks about how the Taber and District Community Adult Learning Association is trying to break down the barriers to literacy for Mennonites, but is struggling because of funding shortfalls.



Jake Hlebert and daughter, Magdalena, 5, enjoy a toboggan ride at a park close to their home in Picture Butte. Hlebert, a Low German speaking Mennonite, moved to southern Alberta from Ontario with his wife, Tina, and their four children. He now runs his own business in the region, working as a general contractor.

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Taber literacy assoc. endeavours to overcome funding barriers

By SUSAN QUINLAN
SOUTHERN ALBERTA

They've been arriving from various points in Mexico for decades, foregoing the warmth of the tropical sun to build what they hope will be a better life in southern Alberta. And they come for different reasons, to purchase land, to find a better paying job or to escape violence caused by the illegal drug trade, now gripping many Mexican states. Whatever their reason, most Low German speaking Mennonites (LGMs) want the opportunity to carve out a better life than the one they left behind, so they can provide their children with more opportunities.

However, before they can take advantage of those opportunities they must first acquire English literacy. Until that time, they'll have to rely on others to serve as translators, whether they want to shop, visit the doctor and even answer the phone. They have to swallow their pride and give up their privacy, until they're able to speak for themselves.

The degree to which LGMs acquire literacy is largely due to their own effort, but in the Taber region, that effort is encouraged by staff and volunteers at the Taber and District Community Adult Learning Association (TDCALA).

"We have had many memorable and heartwarming experiences with the LGM culture," including a trip to their communities in northern Mexico, says Jane Brenner, executive director of the TDCALA.

"We lived and learned of the culture and developed a greater respect, understanding and admiration for those we work with ... We work at building their trust. If they do not trust you, they will not come to the program. You must be culturally-sensitive and aware of their needs."

Many friendships have developed between the LGMs and those affiliated with the TDCALA, who have a can-do philosophy when it comes to providing literacy programs.

All barriers to learning for this group have been taken down, says Brenner, be they financial, with travel, living and childcare expenses or cultural, where tutors and staff make the effort to get to know and befriend each other, encouraging the Mennonites to become part of the larger community.

"Many students come to us with hardly any literacy skills, so they move through different programs in our association."

For example, they might start with tutoring or accessing the English Language Learning Drop-in Centre, then move on to Families Learning Together and the Pre-Apprenticeship Language Learning program.

"What a thrill to see students make that much progress and better yet, what a morale booster for them."

Brenner says the TDCALA's programs have been designed to allow learners to "ladder" from one program to another, as they increase their literacy skills. In that way, they not only acquire literacy, but the training needed to enter a trade or make another career choice, moving on to post-secondary study.

However, in its attempt to achieve its mandate of helping adults acquire literacy, the TDCALA faces constant financial challenges that reduce course offerings and as well, impede LGMs from attending classes.

"These people have large families and without financial support to attend training, there's no way they can come to class."

Brenner says although both the provincial and federal governments claim to support English as a Second Language (ESL) programs, inconsistent provision of funding threatens the ability of LGMs to carve out a new life.

"The LGMs have become very important to our community. Most buy and own their own homes; they're good citizens in that they're responsible, pay their taxes, have beautiful yards; most are very good neighbours...." says Lois Maloney, former mayor

of Vauxhall, where the town's population is almost 80 per cent LGM.

Like many rural towns, Vauxhall was faced with a dwindling population threatening the viability of its schools, recreational facilities and other public structures, so migration of LGMs into these areas is welcomed by many.

David Torrie, a farmer at Grassy Lake, concurs with Maloney and says he and his wife decided to have their older teenagers attend the local high school, rather than bus to a larger centre, to help build community.

"This community used to be composed of farmers retiring with hopes that their kids would run the farms, but many kids move on to other careers. The school suffered with low enrollment ... Since the LGMs have been coming to Grassy Lake, it has totally changed the town," which is now 80 per cent LGM.

"It's a German town. The school has exploded. It's full and they're all LGMs... They're beautiful people and the population here has had really good experiences with them.

"They love basketball; it draws them into the community. The LGM kids are bright, wonderful, talented kids. Once the townfolk start to work with these people and get to know them, they embrace them. Spending time with them and teaching them what they want ... they're just so grateful.

"We were a ghost town. They saved our town. We're even talking about developing a subdivision, which is a miracle. A subdivision in Grassy Lake (pop. 443, 2006)," Torrie shakes his head and laughs.

Brenner notes Alberta Education, Advanced Education and Technology, and Alberta Employment and Immigration (AEI) all include literacy in their mandates. However, these three ministries lack a co-ordinated, strategic approach to ensure literacy programs remain funded to assist ESL learners, so these individuals can in turn secure gainful employment and establish themselves.

"As well, AEI is pushing for everything to go online. What about those with no literacy and no computers?" Brenner asks.

As a direct result of the lack of a co-ordinated effort, Brenner says the LGMs are trapped in low-paying jobs with limited literacy skills, an unfortunate situation given this group's strong work ethic and penchant to be entrepreneurial.

"I recently bumped into one gentleman who had been through our program a few years back and got his Class 1 (semi truck driving) licence. I asked him how things were going and he told me he now has 17 trucks in his fleet. I just couldn't believe it, then he said, 'well Jane, you folks told me to dream big'."

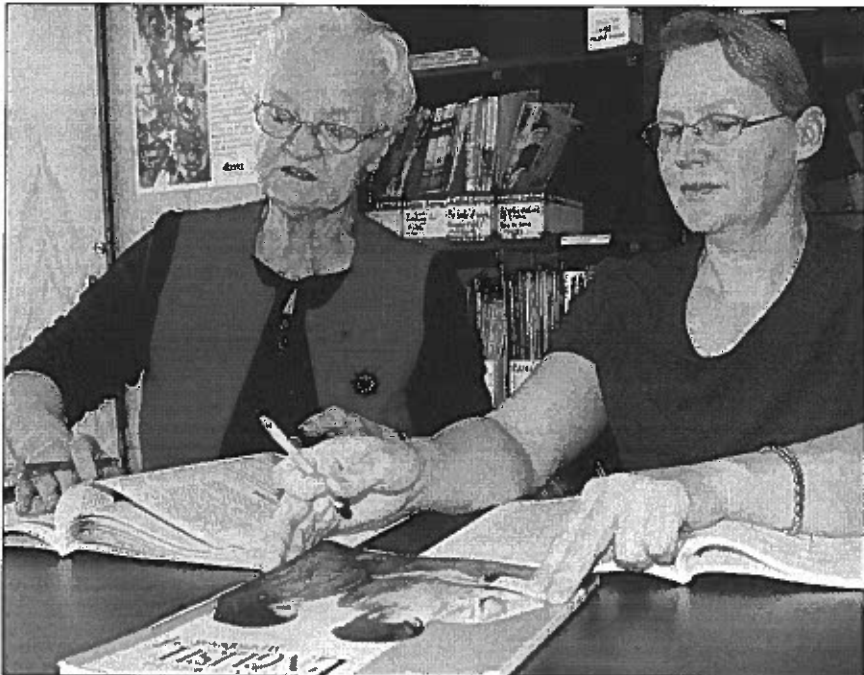
Of the many countries people migrate to, Canadians may wonder why these LGMs have chosen to come to the frozen north and the simple answer to that is easy access. The LGMs hold a variation of citizenship known as "Canadian by descent," where at least one of their parents or grandparents was a Canadian citizen.

Ironically, this classification stands in the way of LGMs receiving the same level of financial support given to others who enter this country to take up permanent residence.

"There's undisputed and adequate federal funding in place to take care of language training for immigrants through the LINC (Language Instruction for New Canadians) program, but there's no such funding available for LGMs because they are not immigrants. Their burden is their classification as Canadian by descent.

"There are 80 community adult learning councils situated throughout rural Alberta that have a mandate to provide ESL, but they're attempting to do so with very limited funds."

To get the money needed to operate the TDCALA, Brenner has, in the past, accessed funds through Alberta Advanced Education and Technology (AAET), and coupled those with small amounts received from several different federal programs and contributions from private donors.



Sadie Boersma, language tutor, reads with Susanna Thiessen (right), a Low German speaking Mennonite (LGM) who is developing her English literacy skills. Thiessen is one of many LGMs living in the Vauxhall area, where the Taber and District Community Adult Learning Association hopes to rent space for a tutoring drop-in centre.

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Breaking Down Barriers To Literacy

Taber Assoc. helping Mennonites the best it can

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AAET works with the province's Community Adult Learning Councils to provide a range of community-based, non-credit learning opportunities that work toward adult literacy and employability enhancement, says Brenner. The councils in turn work closely with various community institutions to assist learners in a seamless transition into the post-secondary system, and all of these relationships are essential in helping ESL adults improve their lives.

The problem with funding arises, says Brenner, because the courses ESL learners must take to gain literacy are not accredited or credit earning. Because of this, participants can't get grant funding or Employment Insurance to cover living expenses while they go to school. This presents a significant problem for the LGM population, as these families rely on their men to earn the bulk of the family's income. If the men attend classes without support, there's no money coming in.

"Because of cutbacks and the current economic climate, the Alberta government has focussed on funding programs that get people into the workforce as quickly as possible," says Tracey Kipla, communications manager for Alberta Advanced Education and Career Development.

Although sympathetic to the LGMs' situation, Kipla recommends they explore other training and employment options that have the required accreditation. However, Brenner says that's impractical, because without the ability to read, write or speak English, there are no programs available and this group is therefore destined to remain in a cycle of poverty.

Two of the TDCALA's most highly subscribed, yet non-accredited programs, are Families Learning Together (FLT) and Pre-Apprenticeship Language Learning (PALL), says Brenner. Although they support the Alberta government's focus on creating a strong foundation for continued economic strength, both have been significantly affected by funding cuts where FLT is now offered on a part-time basis in half the locations and PALL isn't being offered at all. That means a drastic reduction in literacy training, where 450 classroom hours are required for an individual to gain one Canadian benchmark or one level of ability in using the language, to accomplish a certain set of basic tasks.

"Full-time training in the winter, when these farm workers are laid off or unable to find work is the best solution, the one we have seen create the most growth in literacy and employability skills.

"The 17-week FLT program introduces entire families to English and focuses on improving adults' oral literacy, reading, writing, essential and employability skills and family literacy. It's a full-time, 450-hour program that runs four days a week during the winter season, when farm laborers have been laid off," explains Brenner.

Benefits for adults taking the FLT program include an increased likelihood they'll go on to better employment or other learning opportunities, says Brenner, and as well, likely for the first time, they'll understand their role as their child's first educator.

"They also develop a network of friends and support through association with adults in the program, and become better adjusted to the Canadian lifestyle."

Brenner says moms that come to the FLT program want to gain the literacy skills they need to be independent.

"They want to educate themselves, so they can provide a better life for their children."

Men completing the FLT program no longer seek out jobs exclusively in agriculture, says Brenner. They search out positions where more skills are required, as a direct result of their increased training.

"Men and women are breaking away from the idea that education is bad (too worldly) and realize that it's one of the main things they need for a successful life in Canada."

The TDCALA's PALL program was previously sponsored by



Jane Brenner (right), executive director of the Taber and District Community Adult Learning Association (TDCALA), and Cindy Lauwen, administrative assistant, look over a calendar of their course offerings for the upcoming term. With ever increasing numbers of Low German speaking Mennonites moving to the Taber region from Mexico, many of the courses offered at the TDCALA have been tailor made to meet the needs of this large group.

Alberta Employment and Immigration, and developed to assist those wanting to improve their employment opportunities by entering the trades, explains Brenner. The program provides 26 weeks of study to prepare individuals to successfully write trade entrance exams.

"Involvement in the PALL program is life changing. The knowledge, skills and confidence of program participants has greatly increased."

As well, the potential to earn more than a living wage gives the LGMs an opportunity to live without constant financial pressure, says Brenner.

In addition to the FLT and PALL programs, TDCALA operates the English Language Learners' Drop-In Centre.

"At any given time in the drop-in centre there may be a group language training class going on, one-on-one tutoring, citizenship classes, driver's license classes, as well as computer assisted learning and individualized help," says Brenner, adding that funding cuts have now affected the viability of the drop-in centre as well.

Future prospects: the big picture

With concern for the impact of failing literacy rates on this nation's economy, Craig Alexander, VP TD Financial Group, researched and wrote *Literacy Matters: A call for action*.

Alexander states that close to half of Canada's adult population have inadequate prose and document literacy skills, and more than half struggle with numeracy skills.

"For immigrants those figures are even more extreme, where those aged 16 to 65 perform significantly below the national average," which Alexander says is strong evidence Canada is not integrating immigrants into the economy and society to the extent it should be.

In *Reading the Future: Planning to meet Canada's future literacy needs*, a report commissioned by the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL), researchers reiterate Alexander's findings and also conclude the proportion of adults with low literacy is expected to remain unchanged through 2031, factoring in population growth.

In order to succeed in today's economy, CCL researchers state workers must have far more than a rudimentary ability to read and write. They must possess the ability to analyze information, understand abstract ideas and acquire other complex life skills, positively affecting their own lives but as well, profoundly influencing their nation's economy.

In their 2009-2010 *State of Learning in Canada* report, the CCL states its research affirms, "time and again, that the skills and knowledge that citizens bring to their families, their workplaces and their communities helps determine a country's economic success and overall quality of life."

Janet Lane, executive director, Literacy Alberta says community literacy and learning programs offer people who do not think of themselves as learners a safe place to begin their adult learning journey.

"Programs like the one in Taber reach people who would not otherwise engage in learning programs that can change their lives. When government priorities change, programs which quietly make a big difference are often dropped. As the unemployment rate continues to fall in Alberta we are going to need community learning and literacy programs to help enable everyone who wants to work gain the skills they need . . .," says Lane.

"In the past 10 years, according to the Mennonite Central Committee, between 10 and 12,000 LGMs have migrated to southern Alberta and it's estimated those numbers will double, due to escalating violence in northern Mexico and poor living conditions in that country as well," says Brenner.

Given that dramatic influx, Brenner says she has no idea how this group will cope without English literacy instruction.

Success is attainable

Many do succeed, says Brenner, who cites a number of examples including the LGM running the fleet of 17 semi trucks, and a woman who attended FLT even though she had six children to manage including an infant. Her goal was to drive a semi, but also start her own business. She got the semi licence then moved on to develop her own small business and now has more than 50 women working under her supervision. There's also the LGM that wanted to open his own garage and has now done so, and about 55 others who wrote and passed the GED and are now enrolled in post-secondary or deciding which program they would like to pursue.

Charles Hart, manager of the TDCALA's ELL Drop-In Centre, says, "This is a time of profound change in the LGM community. In a single generation, they're acquiring English literacy and moving 'into' Western society," by way of the occupations they choose, as they no longer want to work exclusively in agriculture.

In the past three years, says Hart, the drop-in centre has taught classes ranging from English for Moms to Computer Basics through to Resumé Writing and How to use a GPS, in response to what LGMs request, and about 1,300 have taken classes.

Each LGM has a different goal, says Brenner, and some accomplishments get more attention than others, but they're all pleased when they make progress.

"One student quipped that he has been working construction for years, and now he can spell it."

Regarding the commitment of tutors at the front lines assisting these LGMs, Brenner says they, along with staff, are a special group.

"The tutors don't do it for the money because they don't get paid; what they receive has much greater value. They do it because they believe in their communities and want to build a welcoming and inclusive community. They do it because many of them came here or their parents came here as immigrants and they know what it's like to learn a new language and culture. They do it out of love and kindness, and every one of them will tell you that they learn and get so much more out of tutoring these Mennonites than what they give.

"This group of LGMs falls between the cracks, as they are Canadian citizens born abroad and English is not their first language. They have the least skills to help themselves to build a better life and can't access services, because they can't speak the language. If we don't advocate for them, who will?"