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The London Free Press

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NEWS LOCAL

'It's an amazing gift'

Thu, December 6, 2007

A group of Londoners is making improved literacy a city goal.

By DEBORA VAN BRENK, SUN MEDIA

Reading an obstacle for 1 in 5 Londoners

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Doug Crew helped his six-year-old granddaughter write a letter to Santa last week.

Today, he's reading a book about ghosts.

Asked if that's something he'd have been able to do five years ago, a laugh erupts from deep inside him: "Not on your life."

Crew, 50, recently learned to read. And write. And do math.

Through his stubborn teen years and 30 or 40 different jobs, no one but Crew was aware that he could barely read, he recalls.

Through stints as a lifeguard, apartment super-intendent and drummer in his father's band; through addiction and getting clean; through embarrassment and the struggle to memorize details that seemed to come

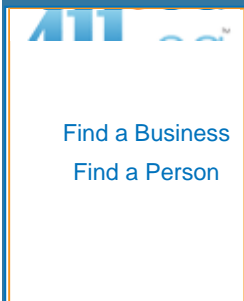


Doug Crew, who recently learned to read, leafs through books at his London home. (MORRIS LAMONT, Sun Media)

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easily to co-workers
and friends -- Crew
kept his secret.

Now he reads to his
three grandkids and
coaches the oldest
with their homework.
"It's an amazing gift,"
he says.

Crew is the hopeful
face of literacy
potential in London,
where a group of
educators, businesspeople, unionists and social-service providers have
committed themselves to making improved literacy a community effort.

Crew's journey started in Chatham, where as a six-year-old starting
kindergarten, he couldn't keep up with his classmates.

He could out-race them, out-wrestle them, out-swim them. But ask him
to read aloud at his desk and he would stumble. Send him to the
blackboard to add three and two, and he would be lost: "They would
laugh at me."

So he made it through with his wits and his wit: he became the class
clown, each September barely advancing to the next grade.

In high school, it took him five times as long to read a book as other
students. "That was frustrating."

Crew dropped out and went to work at age 16.

When he applied to work at Navistar trucks, then called International
Harvester, he was told he had the job -- as long as finished Grade 10.

He walked away, too stubborn to accept those terms.

And he applied to other jobs, often in person so he wouldn't have to
write anything down.

He won those jobs more often than not.

And he still couldn't read. He'd "fake it" -- sometimes by memorizing
everything he was told, sometimes by having other people remind him
what he had just "read" to himself.

When Crew was 25, he applied to a college program that offered a
Grade 11 equivalency for adults.

Their tests showed he had attention-deficit disorder and his reading and
writing skills were at a Grade 3 level. Crew begged them to adapt the
program and let him in.

"I was scared because I had a child and another one on the way and I
needed to support my family."



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That was a turning point. He was far from proficient, but he received his certification.

Even when he started at Beta Brands in London a decade ago, he kept his secret.

As a dough-mixer and machine operator, he had to follow complex formulas to make various cookies, crackers and candies. He memorized those details from his predecessor.

Although some may have suspected, no one knew, not even Doug's father Mel -- who was an admired city politician in Chatham for 33 years even though he had only a Grade 3 education himself.

Doug Crew also became vice-president of the union local at the factory.

So when it closed abruptly a year ago, he found himself leading by example in pushing for retraining help for his co-workers.

And he became an advocate for improved literacy as a path toward a better life.

"I'm not embarrassed because I went back and got an education," he says. "Once I was able to read a little bit better, I was understanding a little bit better."

He credits the support of his wife, who raised two boys to go to college even as she herself returned to school, and his parents.

Crew has a new job at a Strathroy factory, where he often has to read complex manuals to repair machinery.

He hopes something good will come of London's community collaboration to improve literacy.

He has words of advice for them: "If the people are out there offering all this help, my suggestion to them is, 'Please let's get it started.'

"Let's not just talk it. Let's do it."

And to other people struggling to read and write, he says don't be ashamed to seek help. "Let other people know there's nothing to be embarrassed about. You can do anything you want if you set your mind to it."

The London Free Press

IN TOMORROW'S PAPER

A SCHOOL MOURNS: We report the latest details as Ashley Oaks reflects on the loss of one of its teachers



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'It's an amazing gift'

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As many as one in five Londoners can't read enough to be able to decode basic signs and medicine labels -- and that represents a loss that all Londoners need to address, a wide-ranging group of London professionals said yesterday.

"We have a track record in this community of coming together," said Jane Fitzgerald, executive director of the Children's Aid Society of London and Middlesex. "And on this issue, collectively, we can do better."

She was part of a group of educators, business and labour leaders and social agencies that prepared a comprehensive report on literacy in Middlesex County and London.

The report, released yesterday, suggests that almost 1,200 kindergartners in London were judged "not ready to learn" in a 2006 test that gauged school readiness by their age-appropriate ability to communicate.

It also suggests only about half of London adults are literate enough to cope with daily work and life demands.

Child and adult literacy rates are about the same as the provincial average.

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"As a community, we have to ask ourselves whether 'average' is good enough," said Kelly McManus, associate director of community service for the United Way.

"This represents a significant loss of potential -- for these individuals, for their families and for the community," McManus said.

The study was prompted by a chat between city chief administrator Jeff Fielding and Helen Connell, executive director of the United Way.

From that discussion emerged a commitment by community groups to work on an action plan to be unveiled next spring.

"I think it's a catalyst and a call to action," Cathy Sexton, a superintendent with the London District Catholic school board, said.

"The literacy bar is rising," said Tamara Kaattari, executive director of Literacy Link South Central, a literacy information and referral network serving the region.

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