Noneedtopretendanymore

Percy Butler is among the many adults in Baton Rouge and elsewhere who have managed through the daily routines of life and work while pretending to be able to read.

By KRISTEN KING
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Like most concerned parents, Percy Butler repeatedly stresses the importance of education to his two teen-age sons. In return, they help the 32-year-old small-business owner learn to read.

"I tell them ... If you don't have your education, you don't have nothing," he said. "I'm trying to get mine right now, and I tell that to them."

Butler is among the many adults in Baton Rouge and elsewhere who have managed through the daily routines of life and work while pretending to be able to read.

Now he's back in the classroom, hoping he'll be able to stop pretending.

Butler is among about two dozen adults in a phonics-based reading program offered by the East Baton Rouge Parish public school system's adult and continuing education department. Most attend the evening sessions once a week; some go twice a week.

One student speaks three languages, including German and French, and is taking the class to help her pronunciation.

All of the adults in the class can read to some extent.
Students

Excerpt:

But most can't read or write well enough to fill out basic forms or help their children with elementary homework. The class is called "Reading Connections" and has been going on for several years.

The session that started in September is the first one that's used phonics-based lessons from the Texas Scottish Rite Hospital Literacy Program. Students say that's one of the best parts of the class.

Calimine Carville, who teaches the class, said she taught the same program at a local private school for five years before starting to use it with adults, and it's been successful in both settings.

The phonics lessons help students learn general rules about letters and syllables so they can sound out new words as they come across them, she said.

Typically, the class revolves around a taped lesson played over the VCR. Carville tapes the tape periodically to go into the lessons in more depth. One recent night the VCR was broken, so she led the entire lesson herself.

She worked with the group on identifying syllables and how that determines how a word is pronounced.

The class also studied the letter "U," tracing it, writing it with their eyes closed and talking about words like "umbrella.

George Varina, director of the district's adult education program, said basic reading classes for adults typically have high dropout rates, but most people who started in this session of "Reading Connections" have stuck with it.

"The bottom line is they're still coming, and that's what counts," he said. "They can't attend in their step and all that. They're learning."

He said one reason he thinks students have stayed in the class is that it is held in the public library so they aren't easily identified as being unable to read.

Carville, who works as an educational consultant for a psychologist during the day, also said "Reading Connections" offers a sort of "support group" because it's run in group sessions.

"This is more helpful than having a tutor," said Cornelia McFadden, 37, who works at an automobile repair shop.

"You've got a lot of people in here who have the same problem you have. When you try to do something on the board, nobody laughs at you." The students share stories with each other of how they've "bluffed" over the years.

Michael Elsey, 43, describes carrying a completed job application in his pocket so he could copy from it when he applied for a new job.

Larry Peterson, 47, a school custodian in East Baton Rouge Parish, said he would memorize the names of chemicals so he knew which to use when.

Butler, who has a current installation business, said when he got a job address for a job, he checked the street name to the map.

"I've learned to accommodate yourself in a reading world and have gotten as far as you've gotten," she told the group. "It's much, much harder to fake it."

The students also share stories of their schooling and its failure.

A number of them, including Butler, had some high school, and several have diplomas.

"They let me go all the way to 12th grade and all I had to do was sit in the classroom," said Elsey, who works in the linen department at a local hospital. "I went to school every day. It was like I went in the front door and out the back."

Butler and several others said when the had problems reading, they were lumped into special education and forgotten about.

Others said they were quiet so the teachers wouldn't call on them.

The students also share stories of shame with each other.

Angela Spooner, 29, said she had even her friends fooled until she "came out of the closet" several years ago.

Butler said people "used to call me retarded so I used to feel that way. I always felt down about myself".

But the students said "Reading Connections" has let them feel pride in reading.

"I've come to the conclusion in my life that