

Literacy program helps man struggling to turn his life around finally learn to read

by Sarah Carr, The Times-Picayune
Tuesday March 31, 2009, 10:27 PM



CHRIS GRANGER / THE TIMES-PICAYUNE Aubrey Anderson tries out his writing and spelling skills by writing a letter to another adult who is going through similar introductory reading classes in Canada. Anderson's teacher, Giayana Dorsey, back left, sits near him offering some instruction at No Play GED on Tulane Avenue.

A neatly dressed man sits at the keyboard, laboring over every word. His eyes search the keys for each letter. His mouth carefully forms the words after he types them, struggling over some sounds because most of his upper teeth are gone. He writes more challenging words on paper before typing them: "talking, " "learning" and "because." After an hour, he has battled through eight sentences. He starts on the ninth -- and last. He leans down to scribble out one final word by hand. "You see that word, " he says, smiling and relaxing for a moment. "I always wanted to learn how to spell it." That word is "understand."

For nearly five decades, Aubrey Anderson did not understand much of what the literate world takes for granted -- street signs, food labels, papers he had to sign, questions his baby nieces and nephews asked about their school work. He could not read his father's obituary in the newspaper. When Anderson, 48, walked through the door of the NOPLAY, for New Orleans Providing Literacy to All Youth, GED program last summer and asked the staff to teach him how to read, he was two decades older than most of the students and hadn't mastered even the very basics of reading.

A diagnosed paranoid schizophrenic and recovering cocaine addict with a criminal history, Anderson realized learning to read would be merely one step in turning his life around. Yet sometimes he felt that all of life's problems stemmed from this one struggle, that if he could only read, he could more easily keep the drugs, crime, and mental illness at bay. For his entire life, this single deficiency had prevented him from accomplishing even the most basic of goals. He felt trapped, as if watching life pass by from a waiting room. "I couldn't even work at Popeyes, " he said. "I couldn't go to the grocery store without someone writing down a list, so I could hand it to the clerk."

Schools have changed dramatically since Anderson's childhood in the 1960s, but illiteracy remains a monumental challenge facing New Orleans and the state. "The level of functional illiteracy in New Orleans exceeds that of some (developing) countries, " said Calvin Johnson, a retired Orleans Parish judge who created a special criminal docket in 2003 for mental health patients such as Anderson. "It's amazing how much a person who can't read gets cut off."

Few choices

Dressed in a pressed shirt, tie, khakis and a fedora, Anderson stands out among the teenagers and 20-somethings in hoodies, bulky jackets and jeans. He knows he might not make it to college. But for now, he's enjoying the journey. "My mind is brightening, " he said. "It's opening up." Anderson grew up in Carrollton, attending Paul L. Dunbar Elementary School. He never got past the third grade.

ADULT LITERACY

A sampling of adult literacy programs in the area:

Delgado Community College:

Call 671.5434 for information about registration times and locations.

Hope House: 522.5881, 916 St. Andrew St., New Orleans

YMCA Educational Services:

596.3842, New Orleans Public Library, 219 Loyola Ave., New Orleans

Youth Empowerment Project

NOPLAY: 658.9221, 2601 Tulane Ave./2nd Floor, New Orleans

Jefferson Parish Public Schools, Community and Adult Education Department: Call

361.5493 on the West Bank and 736.1844 on the east bank for information about various locations and times

St. Tammany School Board:

985.898.3243, Offers adult GED preparation, but program is more targeted at intermediate to advanced readers

St. Vincent de Paul Adult Learning Center for Empowerment: 822.9288, ext. 16, 1995 Gentilly Blvd.

He struggled to function in a traditional school from an early age, though he was not diagnosed with schizophrenia until his late teens. Groups of people unnerved him, making him anxious or withdrawn. But few alternatives existed between a regular school and an institution.

Anderson lived with his mother, save for a brief hospital stay. As he grew older, he found some work in his neighborhood mowing lawns and picking up trash. But he could not travel outside of his neighborhood alone, or apply for a decent job.

Police arrested him a handful of times between 1990 and 2006 on various charges, including marijuana possession, robbery and assault. He spent a few years in prison.

Two years ago, he started smoking crack, which fueled his paranoia and mood swings. By the time police arrested him a year and a half ago for breaking into an abandoned house, Anderson's life had spiraled out of control. He angered quickly, and often thought others were plotting against him.

"He was a mess," said his sister, Sharon Anderson.

"Yes, Lord," Anderson agreed. "I was a mess."

'Honest truth'

One January afternoon at the NOPLAY center, Anderson's teacher asked him to describe a past mistake. The words flowed, like blood from a cut.

"Drugs, for one. I was at a birthday party in 2007, and I tried crack and liked it. . . . I stopped managing my money. My family knew something was wrong."

The teacher gently interrupted Anderson, motioning to the paper. He wrote haltingly:

"In 2007, I had a party at my mother's home . . ."

Anderson bent closer to the paper, leaning into the pencil. He picked up speed as he wrote about the night.

It "destroyed my life as a respectable person.."

Anderson then filled a blank sheet with the words he had misspelled. He wrote them again and again: introduced, cocaine, party.

He capped off the ending -- "no more cocaine in my life forever" -- with a final thought:

"That's the honest truth."

Not going through motions

When Anderson started at the NOPLAY center, he could barely sound out words, much less write a full paragraph. Instructor Giayana Dorsey went back to the basics, reintroducing him to the alphabet. Then she moved on to consonant blends like "ch" and "th." When Anderson mastered that, she taught him how to connect them into

words.

"Aubrey is so unique," the teacher said. He could easily recognize a term such as "African-American," because someone had trained him to check it off when filling out forms. But he grappled with much shorter words such as "spot."

Anderson spends an hour or two at the center nearly every day. In the past few months, he has focused on writing, keeping up with his journal and even an online blog. Having stayed drug-free for the past year, Anderson wants to apply for a peer drug counseling position. But to do that, he must be able to show that he can take notes.

As someone who has experienced a remarkable turnaround in the past year, Anderson could make an ideal peer counselor someday, said Gina Jackson, Anderson's mental health case manager through criminal court. "He's the first person to be there for the drug tests," she said. "Everybody doesn't want it. Some are just going through the motions, but not Aubrey."

"I just haven't seen anyone who wants it so bad."

Safe haven

On almost any weekday, Anderson can be found somewhere in Tulane Tower, a drab structure that houses the NOPLAY center and other court and social service programs. His mother drops him off early in the morning. Anderson goes to school on the second floor, volunteers at a program for HIV on the fifth floor, visits his public defender on the seventh floor, and meets with Jackson on the eighth floor. He has a part-time job cleaning the NOPLAY office and classrooms.

In between the visits, he smokes cigarettes -- his one remaining vice -- in front of the building, chatting easily with the students, lawyers, felons, social workers and recovering addicts the building draws. He clings to the building and its programs because, he says, they keep away temptation. "That place keeps me clean, " he says. "That place keeps me straight."

No single program or mentor turned Anderson's life around. It took a residential drug treatment center that kept him off the streets for several months. A mental health court judge who considered Anderson's unique needs. A literacy program that gave him hope. Most important was Anderson's own resolve. "He just keeps showing up, " said Joe Jackson, one of his counselors at Grace Outreach Center.

Progress noted

Anderson marks his progress these days through small milestones: An award recognizing his improvement in reading. Letters sent to a pen pal in Canada. Trips to the grocery store without a written list. Sometimes, however, an image from the past reminds Anderson just how far he has come: The sight of a September journal entry where single words such as "name" and "fame" -- and no full sentences -- fill the page. A glimpse of a year-old photo where an unshaven, frightened-looking man stares into the camera. "That was a long time ago, " Anderson said, turning away.