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# Library's adult literacy student an inspiration to tutor as she perseveres through cancer treatment

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Volunteer tutor Carolyn Lee (right) works with Lawana McCalister in the Tulsa City-County Library's Adult Literacy Service on Tuesday. McCalister is undergoing chemotherapy but still tries to make it to her once-a-week reading sessions. JOHN CLANTON/Tulsa World

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To learn about the Tulsa City-County Library's Ruth G. Hardman Adult Literacy Service or to apply to become a volunteer tutor, visit [tulsalibrary.org/literacy](http://tulsalibrary.org/literacy) or call 918-549-7400.

By NOUR HABIB World Staff Writer | 0 comments  
 Lawana McCalister is thrilled when she's able to help her son with his homework.

There was a time when she couldn't have done that, but McCalister began working with a tutor through the Tulsa City-County Library's Ruth G. Hardman Adult Literacy Service more than 10 years ago.

"My reading and writing was nowhere near where it needed to be," she said.

She's made great strides, she said, and is now able to read at a seventh-grade level, meaning she's able to help her 8-year-old son.

McCalister said she went through school in a special education program and was not able to read well. She heard about the adult literacy program in 2003 and signed up after being dropped from a medical associate class because her reading level was too low.

"I've come a long way," said McCalister, who has stuck with the program through various life challenges, the most recent being cancer. She is undergoing chemotherapy, but she still tries to make it to her once-a-week sessions with her reading tutor, Carolyn Lee.

Lee has been a tutor for the adult literacy program nearly as long as McCalister has been a student. She began working with McCalister less than a year ago.

"She has become kind of a role model to me because she continues to come in spite of

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difficulties," Lee said.

"I really respect her diligence, her persistence, her fighting spirit," she said.

Lee said she's stuck with the literacy program so long because she enjoys helping people.

"I feel very passionate about people that want to learn how to read," she said. "It's very hard for a lot of people to admit that they can't read, and when they do that, I feel

even more endeared to them."

Jennifer Armistead, the library's literacy coordinator, said about 14 percent of adults living in Tulsa County have below-basic literacy levels.

The literacy service matches volunteer tutors, who have attended a library training workshop, with anyone 16 or older who reads at or below a sixth-grade level.

The service currently has about 120 active volunteer tutors and 160 students. An additional 20 students are on a waiting list, Armistead said.

More tutors are always needed for the program, but a September push for volunteers coincides with National Literacy Awareness Month. Tutors do not need to have teaching experience.

Armistead said the program retains about 90 percent of its volunteer tutors. Tutors and students are asked to commit for at least a year because that's how long it usually takes to see real improvement, she said.

The program is divided into two tracks: one for native English speakers with basic literacy challenges and one for ESL — English as a second language — learners.

Armistead said students pick their own goals, which may be getting a GED or improving at their jobs.

"Sometimes it's as simple as wanting to read a book to their child or grandchild," she said.

McCalister said one reason she has stuck with the program for so long is her son — she wants to continue to help with his school work.

For some people, she said, it is difficult to face the fact that they can't read as well as they need to, but she said she would recommend the library program to anyone who needs it.

"If you're willing to do the work and everything, they are a good place to help you start learning to read and write," she said.

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



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