



COMMUNITY

North Buffalo Rocket

A Voice

Rocket Communications Guest Columns

Tracy Diina is the Executive Director of Literacy Volunteers of America Buffalo and Erie County.

Recently, I took over the helm at Literacy Volunteers of America/Buffalo & Erie County (LVA/BEC). It is with enormous pride and exuberance that I begin my journey as Executive Director of an agency that performs such a critical role in our region.

I was raised to believe in the idea of civic engagement so volunteerism has always played a major role in my life. I initially began as a literacy volunteer tutor seven years ago. The experience of helping someone learn to read is indescribable and nearly euphoric. It is an entirely gratifying situation requiring a minimal time commitment and delivering a tremendous reward. But why should you help? The following may point to the enormity of the issue:

Currently, between 20-30% of Erie County is functionally illit-

erate, a statistic that belies the near crisis situation that exists. We cannot have strong, vibrant and healthy neighborhoods-or indeed any growth and prosperity--when our citizenry is not engaged in reading. Illiteracy has a strong and direct negative economic impact and should be considered a key issue to our region's economic development efforts. In fact, on a national level, for every dollar spent by Literacy Volunteers to tutor adults, \$33 in economic benefit is returned to the overall economy, according to an economic impact analysis conducted by global management consulting firm AT Kearney in 1999. Obviously, the impact varies depending on the goals and outcomes of the students. Main goals cited were getting or keeping jobs, enhancing career opportunities, getting off public assistance or making qualitative improvements in their lives such as pursuing higher education, reading to children or being a better role model.

There are other ominous societal

effects of low literacy. 84% of unemployed fathers and 82% of unemployed mothers lack a high school diploma. Literacy is intergenerational. If parents can't read, it is likely that their children won't read well either. Between 41% and 44% of adults with the lowest literacy skills live in poverty according to Federal poverty guidelines. Knowing this, it is difficult to believe that New York State funding for adult literacy has been frozen at the same level since 1988. We are hopeful this will change due to the enlightened leadership of Assemblymember Sam Hoyt who has asked for a substantial increase in this year's state budget.

While the literacy issue looks severe, a solution exists. One-on-one and small group tutoring has proven effective at improving literacy and living skills. In our last program year, 19 of our learners enrolled in or completed a GED program, 59 students obtained employment or upgraded their jobs, 12 students left public assistance, 19 students received their US citizenship and 11 students voted for the first time. As the region's sole provider of one-on-one literacy training, we are poised to address this issue. The collective wealth of a community cannot be enhanced until the most fundamental of all building blocks-reading-is made a priority for all.