

# Stars aligned to end literacy gap

**By MARIE P. GRADY**

Sometimes the stars are just aligned.

Ask Sheriff Michael J. Ashe Jr. In a political career that has spanned decades of change, he knows something about the pulse of a community. He also knows something about what a community needs to grow and prosper.

Literacy. Opportunity. Vision.

Ashe was among members of the Hampden County Literacy Cabinet who gathered in downtown Springfield recently to learn more about a workforce development plan for the state's third largest city. The faces in the room were themselves a constellation of leaders from the business, education, political and social service communities.

The Literacy Cabinet was formed last May to help move forward a public agenda that puts education and literacy on the front burner. The simple fact of the matter is that without a literate workforce, there won't be workforce development.

Those gathered in the room have seen the effects of a literacy gap first hand. They included Maura McCaffrey, vice president of Health New England, one of the region's largest employers. Also at the table were Jack Henry, vice president of Big Y, and Robert Schwarz, vice president of Peter Pan Bus Lines.

All spoke of the challenges of finding qualified people for key positions in a city where nearly half of high school students fail to graduate and the number of residents with bachelor's degrees, at 20 percent, is far below the state average of 33 percent.

Thomas Moriarty, Hampden County Register of Probate, has witnessed the results of poverty and illiteracy at probate court. The newest Cabinet member, Moriarty has seen the outcome: fractured families living in poverty in a county which leads the state for children not being raised by their own parents.

The gathering also included leaders from the education community, including Holyoke Community College President William F. Messner, Springfield Technical Community College dean Arlene Rodriguez and Aimee Griffin Munnings, director of the Law and Business Center for Advancing Entrepreneurship at Western New England College.

Agma Sweeney, another Cabinet member, is a district aide for Congressman John W. Olver who has long advocated for education through the Westfield Association of Spanish Americans. Leaders of the region's top non-profits also were represented, including Carla Oleska, director of the Women's Fund of Western Massachusetts, and Mary Anne Herron, director of the Harold Grinspoon Charitable Foundation.

On this day, the room included not only long-time political luminaries such as Ashe but others who will help to shape the city in a new era of challenges. Within weeks of the meeting, Denise R. Jordan, president of 5A, the Academics, Athletics, Arts Achievement Association, was named new chief of staff for newly elected Mayor Domenic Sarno.

The gathering also included Rus Peotter, general manager of WGBY.

The group heard some sobering statistics about the city's needs from J. William Ward, director of the Regional Employment Board, and Larry Martin, planning and employer

services manager for the agency. In essence, their message was that a comprehensive, top-down commitment to providing a literate workforce is key to the city's future.

Smart people began to realize that some time ago. That is why, although they are among the busiest people on the planet, it wasn't hard to enlist the Cabinet, which also includes the publisher of the *The Republican*, the region's largest daily newspaper; the president of Chicopee Savings Bank; two top educators from the city's public school system; the city's public library director; the president of the Greater Springfield Urban League and leaders from the Irene E. and George A. Davis Foundation and the National Conference on Community and Justice.

Ashe, who was accompanied by Andree Duval, director of educational programs for the Hampden County Correctional Center, has some experience in the arena of addressing social ills. The jail has helped some 3,700 ex-offenders tonget their graduate equivalency diplomas and Ashe, along with Schwarz, have taken leadership roles in helping to end homelessness as we know it in the city.

In what perhaps was a sign of his commitment to the cause, Ashe managed to make this meeting even though he was being honored the same evening at Elms College for his community service. Maybe that's because he knows the critical importance of this mission.

For too long, the sheriff said, "We have had our heads in the sand."

But Ashe, an optimist whose vision has never been limited to the political universe, put his proverbial finger to the wind and saw hope for one of the greatest challenges of our times.

"At times, the stars can be lined up appropriately, and I really think they are now."

***Marie P. Grady is director of the Literacy Works Project for the Regional Employment Board of Hampden County. She can be reached at [mgrady@rebhc.org](mailto:mgrady@rebhc.org) or at 413-755-1367.***

**By MARIE P. GRADY**

Imagine, if you will, a corn field. From a distance, you can see the tall green stalks reaching toward an amber sun in a pale blue sky.

Now imagine walking toward that corn field. As you get closer, you realize that only half of the crop is growing. Hidden just beyond them is the rest of the field, small and withered, their husks opening to stunted ears.

The kernels of corn inside are perfectly formed, but the plant has not reached its full potential.

That is the state of education and literacy in Hampden County, Massachusetts, home to you and me.

And the field we have been sowing, or in which we have been growing, has been a mirage. From a distance it seems to be thriving. Up close, the fruit of the promised land crumbles in our hands.

Massachusetts is the most educated state in the nation, with one of the highest per capita incomes in the world. Yet half of our students in urban cities don't graduate from high school and a wave of newcomers who don't speak the English language become our gardeners, instead of our CEOs. Our leaders. Our presidents.

It wasn't always this way. In years past, our fathers and grandmothers didn't need an education or language skills to find good jobs in factories, where they earned incomes that allowed them to send their children to college.

Those factory jobs don't exist anymore. They have been replaced by jobs that require advanced reading and math skills to operate complex machinery, or, by minimum wage jobs that require little and offer little in return.

To reach toward the sun, every one of us needs an education. To thrive and even to survive, every one of us, and our children, need to learn.

Like a parched plant, we need the water.

In this space, I hope we will lead many to it. Two months ago, I became director of a program called Literacy Works. It is a project run by the Regional Employment Board of Hampden County and funded by an organization called the Irene E. and George A. Davis Foundation. The foundation was started by a family that once operated one of those factories that hired newcomers, like my parents, or your grandparents, or you.

The program, which was begun by funding from an organization called Commonwealth Corporation, also receives funding from the state Department of Education.

In my first several weeks on the job, I visited the gardens where crops, young and old, are reaching toward the light. They include the Puerto Rican Cultural Center in Springfield, run by Eva Gomez and program director Robin Hodgkinson.

There, I talked to students like Walter, a 52-year-old native of Peru, who was an engineer in his homeland but has been doing work that pays far less money here all because he hadn't yet mastered the English language. He is mastering it now, and because he is, he is a master of his own universe.

I met a young man named Danny, who has a nursing license in Puerto Rico and who has been trying to learn the English language here so he can master the test that will make him a licensed nurse in Massachusetts.

And I met Rafnilda and Ivette, young women from the Dominican Republic who were accomplished students in their homeland and who came to Springfield when their father accepted the job as pastor at a local church.

They are not the only students in the family. Their parents were taking a class in another room on the night I visited the Puerto Rican Cultural Center.

In another part of Springfield, I met Armando Feliciano, who runs a program that has helped hundreds earn their graduate equivalency diploma and who has long preached the value of education.

He reached back in his memory and told me a story about his days as a young man, fighting the slum lords of New York City, who sent gangs out to snuff out the voice of the discontented. A pious Irish nun, he said, rolled up her sleeves one night and knocked out the gangs sent to silence him and his followers.

Then she rolled down her sleeves and said a prayer.

I'm not a pious Irish nun, but I am the daughter of Irish immigrants, and I do have a prayer. I hope that one day every stalk in that field of corn will be growing tall and reaching toward the sun.

In the time to come, I want you to hear from some of the many who have found the water, in programs from Springfield to Holyoke, where the commitment to education starts at the mayor's office and ends with the Juntos Collaborative.

I want you to believe, as I do, that every one of us has a right and a responsibility to reach toward that sun. And, if we have been warmed by that light, we have an obligation to help others find it.

For many years I was a newspaper editor. I left, in part, last year, to pursue a law school education. A good reporter or editor always knows there is much more to learn.

I hope that all of the citizens of Hampden County – whether they are Russian, Somalian, Polish, Portuguese, African-American, Latino or Irish – will join me in this journey toward the light.

***Marie P. Grady is director of the Literacy Works Project of Hampden County and former managing editor of The Republican, the largest daily newspaper in Western Massachusetts. In the months to come, this column will feature information on programs that help all of us to learn and the many students who have grown tall because of them.***

# Program brings world of knowledge

By MARIE P. GRADY

The words are foreign to me.

“Cestitamo Vam.”

“Tebrikler.”

“Chuc Mung.”

“Felicidades.”

Congratulations.

That is the one word I understand.

That is the one word all the others mean.

In Yugoslavian. Turkish. Vietnamese. Spanish.

And there are also Chinese and Cambodian words that I can't reproduce here. I am literate, but computer literate? No, I am at the back of any class when it comes to manipulating technology to get the proper accents and symbols that the languages of the world demand.

Come to think of it, I am at the back of almost any computer class, period.

But these are the words I see in a program for the May 11 ABE/College Transition Graduation at Holyoke Community College when I arrive too late for most of the programs but thankfully on time to wolf down a potluck smorgasbord from eight different countries.

They are words from the countries of the students who graduated from this program to prepare adult education students to attend college. I see their names imprinted on the back of the program: Isabel Bernal, Diane Chapdelaine, Sophie Chen, Camile Davis, Serpil Durdu, Sopheak Heng, Vila Kolenovic, Sevun Moran, Rosa Rodriguez.

And I can feel the light of their smiles as they line up on stage for class pictures.

Someone tells me they have recited, in eight different languages, a Marianne Williamson verse that was included in Nelson Mandela's 1994 Inaugural Address.

After some research, I am not sure whether the Marianne Williamson essay was ever cited by Mandela, whose soul and eloquence remained free despite years of imprisonment in apartheid South Africa before he became president.

In 1993, the social activist and poet Marianne Williamson wrote:

*„Our deepest fear*

*is not that we are inadequate.*

*Our deepest fear is that we are*

*powerful beyond measure.*

...

*Your playing small doesn't serve the world.*

*There's nothing enlightened about shrinking*

*so that other people*

*won't feel insecure around you.”*

In his 1994 Inaugural address, Mandela said:

*“The time for the healing of the wounds has come.*

*The moment to bridge the chasms that divide us has come.*

*The time to build is upon us.*

*We have, at last, achieved our political emancipation.”*

Have we?

I am late for this graduation because I was at another meeting of a statewide group that is desperately trying to get more money for adult education in a difficult state budget year. I know that adult education is very likely at the bottom of the priority list for the state Legislature.

And the machinations to get it to the top of the list are Olympic-sized hurdles. There are political cultures and ideological territories. And it occurs to me that these students posing for pictures could teach so many of us a lesson.

How to rise above insecurities and ego and self interest to shine in a foreign environment. How to break through barriers of culture and expectation. How to give something back with no expectation of ever getting anything in return.

Steve Alvarez came here from the Dominican Republic about a year ago with little English and fewer prospects. He graduated from this program and is now a student at HCC and hopes to graduate with a degree in computer science. He is also a mentor to others who came after him even though his own journey is arduous.

“I feel great helping them,” he says, as if that isn’t evident.

Elia Dreyfuss is heading this program, which HCC has stepped up to support after the loss of funding from a private educational foundation that is shifting its grant priorities. Robin Hodgkinson, one of dozens of adult education program leaders across the region, gets a big hug from Alvarez. From year to year, governmental funding for people like Robin hangs in the balance, but the rewards of enriching lives seem to make up for the uncertainty.

In a previous life, as a newspaper executive, I was asked to write an essay about what it was like to look at the world around me. In part, this is what I wrote in 1998:

*“Big city colors. Black. White. The gray of asphalt that seems to steam in the summer sun.*

*“Small town America. A flag flapping under a white steeple. The warm clasp of a handshake from someone who will always know your name.” ...*

*“I want to recognize failure as a human frailty. I want to learn from it, not to shrink from it, or revel in it when it belongs to someone else. This is what I don’t want: camps, divisions, cliques, the easy way out.”*

When it comes to literacy and adult education, there should be no camps and divisions, no political ideologies or small countries that guard their territories and therefore shrink from a changing world. No egos that would use the cause and the names associated with it to advance themselves or their interests.

To get where we are, and be who we are, most of us have navigated political landscapes, whether it’s in the barrios or in the boardrooms of America. Most of us have never suffered like the Nelson Mandelas of the world and risen above the challenges for the common good.

It is hard to rise above. It is easier to meet expectations or choose sides.

The greatest achievements in this world come not from confrontation, but from collaboration and education. Just ask the students that graduated on May 11, 2007, at HCC. They could teach all of us a lesson.

***For more information on the college transition program at HCC contact program director Elia Dreyfuss at [edreyfuss@hcc.mass.edu](mailto:edreyfuss@hcc.mass.edu) or 413-552-2852. For more information on other literacy programs, including college transition programs, contact Literacy Works at 413-755-1367 or [mgrady@rebhc.org](mailto:mgrady@rebhc.org).***

# Does Castro need to teach us a lesson on education?

By Marie P. Grady

In this country, 99 percent of the people are literate and doctors are so plentiful they are exported like a national crop.

The United States?

No. Cuba.

Somehow the communist island nation enters the discussion at a crowded desk in the library of Chestnut Accelerated Middle School in Springfield, Mass. Dana Mohler Faria, special adviser on education to Gov. Deval Patrick, thinks of Castro's Cuba as educators and community activists talk to him about the tremendous literacy gap in Hampden County.

Cuba, or Coobah, as my father would probably pronounce it, outranks the United States when it comes to the greatest GNP of all. The human brain.

Say what? You mean the cigar chomping, Army fatigue clad Castro leads a more literate nation than George Bush? Add Cuba to the list of places I must get to before, as my Irish relatives say, more than one foot is "buried in the ground."

"I'm concerned about literacy and dropout rates," Mohler Faria says. "I get frustrated because we've got great test scores. That's all good and well. But then you look at the achievement gap that follows racial and economic lines ...."

In Springfield that gap translates into this: About half of high school students never graduate. In Massachusetts, one of the most affluent and educated states in the nation – if not the world – it translates into this: One-third of the potential workforce is functionally illiterate.

"In Cuba, the literacy rate is 99 percent," says Mohler Faria, who is the president of the largest community college in Massachusetts, Bridgewater State. "And here ....."

His voice trails off.

But recognition of a problem is only the beginning of the solution. Despite one of the most ambitious education plans since the Education Reform Act of 1993, the governor's administration cut adult education funding by more than \$2 million from this year's levels. Then the House leadership cut it some more, before the Senate, thanks to lawmakers like Sen. Michael Knapik of Westfield and Gale Candaras of Wilbraham, restored some of the funding.

Mohler Faria was in Springfield on June 14 at the invitation of Henry M. Thomas III, a member of the Hampden County Literacy Cabinet and the state Board of Education. Before meeting students in Chestnut classes and touring German Gerena Elementary School, he met with educators and community activists who have been fighting the good fight to get people engaged in education and community.

They included Armando Feliciano, director of adult education programs for Springfield schools; Dr. Jeff Scavron, a Brightwood Health Center physician who has long been looking for community cures; Milta Franco, director of the North End Outreach Network; Michael Denny, director of the New North Citizen Council; and Orlando Santiago, a parent activist who has never been shy about holding school administrators to account for their part in the education gap involving Latino children.

And there were educators, including Denise L. Pagán-Vega, assistant superintendent for Springfield schools, and Sylvia Galván, director of English Language Programs at Springfield Schools, not to mention Chestnut Principal Lydia Martinez and Gerena Principal Analida Munera.

They all seemed to be telling Mohler Faria something he already knew. The state and society itself needs to invest more in literacy programs at all levels, not just in dollars, but in the passion that must come from the top and not stop at the latest press conference announcing improvements in test scores. For more than a decade these press conferences have been taking place amid a phalanx of cameras and charts and success stories, that always conveniently omitted the fact that half of the class in urban cities had just disappeared.

But passion must also come from within. Passion, unlike rage, does not just point fingers of blame. It is a force that begins with an individual and engages a family and sets a community and the larger great community of the world on fire.

It does not accept excuses or declare “mission accomplished” when the war has only been half won.

In a back and forth with middle school students at Chestnut, Mohler Faria, one of few college administrators of Cape Verdean descent, told students, in essence, “If I can succeed any of you can.”

He was right, but sadly, wrong. Too many are not succeeding.

And in this great country, still a beacon of light to immigrants, we must collectively ask ourselves that eternal question. “Why?”

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# Holyoke fails to get even start at family literacy

By **MARIE P. GRADY**

Even.

The word suggests equality, no matter which side of the train tracks you were born on.

And that was the intent of the Even Start family literacy program when it first began under President George Herbert Walker Bush in 1989. The goals then were to even up the playing field and break the cycle of family illiteracy by educating parents and children.

Fast forward to the present, and the president's son, President George W. Bush, is again trying to kill the federal program even as his mother supports the cause through the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy. The casualties: family literacy programs in Western Massachusetts, including a desperately needed one in Holyoke.

Funding levels had dropped from a high of \$225 million to \$82 million this year when the president again proposed eliminating the program, saying other literacy models demonstrated more success.

While the funding hangs in the balance in Washington, the number of programs approved for grants by the state Department of Education was slashed from 22 to four.

Recently, the City of Holyoke, which is the poorest community in the state with the highest rate of teen pregnancy, learned it was not among them.

The winning candidates were all from the eastern part of the state: Boston, Fall River, Lowell and Waltham. And because the state chose to fund four - not five - most of the programs received substantially more money this year.

Except for Holyoke, of course, which received nothing.

The Hampden County Literacy Cabinet, a group of 20 influential leaders in the business, non-profit and education worlds, recently agreed to send a letter of concern about the decision and literacy funding in general to state officials. The group is aware that Western Massachusetts programs have been traditionally underfunded, receiving about 6 percent of the state adult education funding pie last year despite demonstrating 9 percent of the need statewide.

Congressman John W. Olver, a senior member of the House Appropriations Committee, remains committed to the program, according to his staff.

It may well be that Holyoke, which has among the poorest, most transient populations in the state, simply didn't score high enough in several grant criteria, including ability to retain adults referred from the state Department of Transitional Assistance. But then Holyoke doesn't draw from the same pool of candidates, as, say, Waltham.

According to a community profile page on the state Department of Education website, Holyoke's per capita income is \$15,913, 40 percent of children live in poverty and more than 30 percent of adults do not possess a high school diploma. Another 10 percent do not speak English well. By contrast, per capita income in Waltham is \$26,364, 5 percent of children live in poverty and about 13 percent of adults do not possess a high school diploma. Four percent of Waltham adults have limited proficiency in the English language.

When it comes to current four-year high school graduation rates, the differences are even more stark: In Holyoke, 49.4 percent, or less than half of the class of 2006, graduated. In Waltham, 88.6 percent graduated.

Recently, I asked Anne Serino, program manager at the state Department of Education's Adult and Community Learning Services, for a look at the winning grants and the reviewers' comments. After state lawyers agreed the documents were public, she said the state would release them for review.

Serino is no stranger to concerns about literacy funding in Western Massachusetts. Last year, based on the advocacy of local literacy advocates, including Holyoke educator Paul Hyry, she pushed through a funding formula that gave traditionally underfunded areas of the state more dollars from an Economic Stimulus Bill for adult education.

But that bill was a one-time boost to alleviate long waiting lines for services.

In 2006, Boston adult education programs received 28 percent of the state funding pie and demonstrated 14 percent of the need for services.

Even?

Not even close.

***Marie P. Grady is Literacy Works Project director for the Regional Employment Board of Hampden County Inc. She can be reached at 413-755-1367 or at [mgrady@rebhc.org](mailto:mgrady@rebhc.org).***

# Lawyer takes on system in name of education

By MARIE P. GRADY

Bryan K. Clauson has the face of a pugilist and the passion of a saint on steroids.

How do I know this? Because long after I have finished my eggplant parmesan in the Red Rose Restaurant in Springfield's South End, his tuna grinder sits there almost untouched.

That's because this 46-year-old lawyer is too busy making his case to eat. It is not a case destined to win him millions of dollars but one which he hopes will mean a different future for thousands of youth.

Bryan Clauson is a court-appointed child advocate who is taking on "the system." The system in this case is the one that is supposed to ensure that no child is left behind.

But, as Clauson sums up, it is a system more concerned with meeting federal and state mandates for student success than with the students themselves.

Clauson has won some early victories in a Hampden County Superior Court case arguing that school systems such as Springfield's routinely "unenroll" children under the age of 16 – often in state foster care – for failing to show up to school. He is also arguing that the state, as the custodial parent, has the responsibility to ensure they show up, especially since state law dictates that children must stay in school until they are 16.

In a case with nationwide implications, a state hearing officer has already found that special education students have been improperly unenrolled by the Springfield School District while the local judge has ordered Springfield to stop unilaterally unenrolling special education students who fail to show up for school.

Clauson believes that school administrators routinely unenroll these problem children so they can ensure a student body that meets federal attendance mandates under the "No Child Left Behind Act." At stake are millions in federal education dollars.

The slimmer student body may also ensure that school districts have a prayer of passing the high-stakes Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System test. Otherwise known as the MCAS, this test has been the barometer of student success in Massachusetts and the subject of annual press conferences about rising student performance for years. Until this year, though, these press conferences never highlighted the fact that half of students in many urban districts never stayed in high school long enough to get a diploma.

Their absence boosted overall test scores but still betrayed a huge achievement gap between races and ethnicities. Under the federal "No Child Left Behind Act," districts must report four-year graduation rates, and the results show what The Republican

reported three years ago: There is a disappearing class, especially when it comes to black and Latino students.

It is almost as though they have been forgotten, amid the glare of the TV cameras at those annual press conferences touting improvements in MCAS success rates.

For their part, school and state administrators are dealing with a Herculean challenge: children on the run. Hampden County leads the state for fractured families, or the percentage of children who are not being raised by their natural parents under court order.

The state child welfare system is straining to meet the need, as evidenced by headlines about unmanageable case loads for social workers and horrific stories about children who end up dead, either in foster homes, or trying to flee them.

So, I ask Bryan K. Clauson, a former mental health worker who got his law degree later in life: “Well, how is the school system supposed to handle all these troubled children?”

I’m used to people being flummoxed by such questions, but he is excited. You have special schools, almost reform schools, he says, that have extra staff and extra security. You tell misbehaving students that they will end up there, far away from the young loves of their lives, and you’d be surprised at how quickly they will fall into line.

And where does the money come from to staff these special schools, I ask.

He tells me that the small fortune spent on court cases to deal with these children could be directed toward the schools.

Ah, but I think: How can children who have never known real love be inspired by the loss of it? How can state money be so easily reallocated?

Still, his passion is a welcome respite from the status quo, in which we convince ourselves of the biblical belief that we will always have our poor.

But I’m cynical enough to know that a lawyer of such passion is not in this just for his clients. Every lawyer savors the thrill of victory.

Maybe this case is the modern-day equivalent of “Brown vs. The Board of Education.” That landmark case was supposed to ensure equal educational opportunities for all, but these days too many kids aren’t staying in school long enough to get them.

And the ideals that carried the day then, more than half a century ago, seem like a runaway dream. Kind of like the runaway children, who slip under the radar screen and by disappearing help us to meet our collective mandates: our national educational code, our national conscience.

The problem is that they never really vanish. They show up years later, in unemployment lines, in jails, if, they have ever made it to this point.

One day soon we will be staring all of them in the face and wondering why we didn't do something sooner to stem this systemic tide of failure.

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# Educators tackle problem of a lifetime

By **MARIE P. GRADY**

On a hot summer day, in the middle of school vacation, several students were studying the most significant problem they had ever encountered.

After years of study, most could recognize the problem instantly. What was harder to come by was an answer.

It had eluded them all for so long that many others would have given up years ago. They should have been sitting there, slack jawed and listless, looking up every now and then to check the clock.

Instead they were engaged. They were more than engaged. They were passionate and they were frustrated.

But then again, they were not just students. They were the principals and educators at high schools in Springfield, Holyoke and Chicopee.

The problem they have been assigned seems akin to Einstein's Theory of Relativity.  $E=mc^2$ . In Einstein's theory "E" stood for "energy", "m" stood for mass and "c" stood for the speed of light, squared.

In this basement room at the headquarters of the United Way on Mill Street in Springfield the formula was translated, at least in my mind, to, "Education = More Children (succeeding). Squared."

For years, perhaps a decade or more, these educators have been dealing with a problem that has profound implications for all of us: half of their students, in many urban districts, fail to graduate.

For at least six months, ever since Gov. Deval Patrick spoke at a conference on high school graduation rates in Worcester, Brad Sperry, senior planner at the Regional Employment Board of Hampden County, has been bringing high school principals, social service providers and others together to discuss the most pressing issue of our time.

I know educators because I count them among relatives and friends. A former journalist, I once thought that journalists were among the most cynical people on Earth. Later, I thought educators held that particular title.

Then, I realized, that if you have stopped caring about a problem, you stop talking about it. Talking is the first step toward ideas and ideas are the first step toward a solution. Cynics are known as cynics because they talk. Because they talk, they are not cynics.

Brad Sperry keeps them talking. Even if it means cutting them off at times so others can talk.

I first met Brad when I was working on the “City of Hope” summits in Springfield . The summits were launched by The Republican and moderated by Denise Jordan, who later joined the Hampden County Literacy Cabinet, to provide solutions to problems rooted in poverty.

There were many dedicated people involved in that effort, but I instantly recognized Brad as a “doer,” not a “talker.” I had no idea I would end up working with him just a short time later on efforts to end the literacy gap in Hampden County.

At this meeting of educators, Brad seems to me a New-Age Yogi Bear, trying to stoke the fire without letting it get out of control.

What do educators and others think is needed to resolve this looming crisis?

Systemic reform at the middle school level, insuring students are prepared to enter high school, is on the top of the list. They also want to see a resolve from the governor, the Legislature, the courts and every state agency to make sure that every student who enters high school leaves it with a degree. Sperry has already helped them to get a grant to help track students who move in and out of neighboring districts.

This effort is not a pipe dream. I recently wrote about the fact that Cuba has a 99 percent literacy rate, a fact I learned from Dana Mohler Faria, the governor’s special education adviser, during a visit he made to Springfield that was arranged by Henry M. Thomas III, another member of the Hampden County Literacy Cabinet.

Some of the school principals in the room on this day talked approvingly about their own experience as youth and the fact that those who skipped school would soon be sent to a county work farm. They seemed open to any and every solution. They are not alone in their concern. The room was filled with representatives from Future Works, a job training agency in Springfield; Holyoke Community College, and that city’s ENLACE and public school program; and other school and social service representatives from Springfield, Chicopee and Holyoke.

Also involved in the group is an attorney who has filed lawsuits to force state and public school officials to keep students in school, rather than “unenrolling” them when they decide not to show up.

Already the group has come up with a firm action plan and set of recommendations that we can all only hope will be reviewed by public policy makers. After all, the time has come to stop extending our palms and inviting defeat.

I have heard, and have even heard myself saying, “This is partly a cultural problem. How do you get the community invested in the idea that education is the ticket to a better life?”

The fact that almost every editor and publisher of Latino publications in the Pioneer Valley has agreed to publish news on literacy shows that there is already a recognition in one community of the problem. Mainstream English media, such as The Republican, The Reminder publications and the Palmer Journal Register, also are dedicating valuable space to literacy news.

But what about the larger community? The community of all of us? Why is it OK and acceptable when half of our children fail? As warriors like Brad Sperry have known for years, it isn't. It just isn't.

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# Family Literacy program rekindles dreams

BY MARIE P. GRADY

Marilyn Santana is the daughter of Carlos Santana. And when you see her easy smile, it reminds you of the legendary guitarist who can turn rock's mean, hard riffs into soft lines that stay with you long after the song is over.

I think I argued with my brothers years ago over whether he was the greatest guitarist of all time. But, in your 40s, nothing is certain, so who knows. In those days I could have thought any number of guitarists were gods.

On a recent night, after telling me she is the daughter of Carlos Santana, Marilyn smiles and says, "But not the one."

We both laugh.

Somehow, I already know this.

If she was the daughter of the rock legend, she probably wouldn't be sitting in a class in Holyoke trying to get her graduate equivalency diploma, or GED, because she never had a chance to finish high school. She probably wouldn't be working two jobs and raising three kids on her own, including two teen-agers.

But, perhaps because she is the daughter of another Carlos Santana, she was born with a drive that has the power to lift her beyond fate and circumstance. And, I think, because she loves her kids, she has always gone the extra mile, even when it has been painful and lonely. And somehow I know this woman will succeed.

Marilyn is among 10 young women on a recent night attending a collaborative family literacy program run in the basement offices of the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children at 230 Maple St. A partnership with the Community Education Project and the Holyoke Public Schools, the program allows mothers to continue their education while their children are cared for in the Parent Center next door.

The program is part of the Pathways to Family Success family literacy program in Holyoke. Funded by the state Department of Education, Verizon and the Massachusetts Family Literacy Consortium, the program focuses on educating the whole family. Staff provide family support and intergenerational literacy activities.

My visit came as the state of Massachusetts prepared to celebrate Family Literacy Month in November. Although funding remains sparse, the need for such programs can't be overestimated.

Pathways Coordinator Jody Spitz and MSPCC Parent Center Director Maggie Marrero said family literacy can mean the difference between a life of promise and a life on the margins. One graduate is now employed at a large hospital and studying to be a nurse. Another, a young entrepreneur, recently opened his own bakery.

But with a modest budget of about \$50,000, including a five-year grant from Verizon which may soon come to an end, the program is serving just a fraction of those who need help in this city. Holyoke, which leads the state in teen pregnancies and per capita

poverty, recently became a victim of federal budget cuts when it lost funding for its much larger federal Even Start family literacy program.

Yet even smaller programs such as this one have the potential to change many lives.

The 10 women in teacher Wendi Carman's class say it has allowed them to do something that sometimes seemed impossible: reach again for dreams deferred.

"Without this literacy program, we're like, nowhere," says Maria Ramos, who wants to work in human services. "We thank God for this."

Lorna Andujar takes a break from her own study to read a book with her daughter, Gisselle Bonilla, 2, and son, Nathan Bonilla, 9.

Some day, she'd like to be a forensic scientist, but she knows her study now is just a beginning.

Andujar, 28, says she was tired of being "in and out of public assistance. I want to be a role model for my kids. My father would always say, 'Get your education.'"

She didn't listen to him then, but she is listening to him now. "Now that I'm older, it's important to me to be somebody."

Classmate Celines Santiago wants to work with special needs kids. Delilah Perez, a young mother-to-be, doesn't know yet where her education will take her, she just knows she wants it.

Lacecia Davis, 36, wanted to be an archaeologist once, but life got in the way. While she studies for her GED, her children, Christopher, 5, and Ezekial, 3, are being cared for in another room. She says she could never pursue her dream if there wasn't a program like this.

What happens when a dream remains deferred? The poet Langston Hughes asked that question once and wondered if the dream dries up, "like a raisin in the sun."

When a parent's dream dies, sometimes the future of the family can die along with it. Sometimes the potential of whole generations can crumble.

Mothers like Davis are determined not to see that happen.

Civilized society, she says, is founded on the bedrock that everyone is entitled to an education. Many, she said, have died in the struggle to make equal educational opportunity possible.

But some have to work harder to get it.

"Not everything is guaranteed in life. Not everyone is born with a silver spoon in their mouth," she says.

Then, as if remembering back to when she first put her dreams on hold, she offers some words of advice to others who will follow in her footsteps.

"Don't listen when people say, 'You're not good enough.'"

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# By the numbers: Literacy at all ages counts

By **MARIE P. GRADY**

When Dr. James J. Heckman was honored with the Nobel Prize for economics in 2000, his official biography recounted not only a life inspired by the pursuit of knowledge but his early years of awakening in the Deep South.

Heckman, the chief speaker at a literacy conference in Springfield last month, grew up a stone's throw from the University of Chicago, in the city's Hyde Park neighborhood. But when he was 12 years old, his family moved to Kentucky and later to Oklahoma.

"My brief time in the South and a later trip to the Deep South in the early 1960s with my Nigerian college roommate left lasting impressions on me as I encountered the system of racial discrimination known as 'Jim Crow' in its final manifestation. The separate water foundations, park benches, bathrooms and restaurants of the Jim Crow South startled me. These experiences motivated my lifelong study of the status of African Americans, and the sources of improvement in that status."

As Heckman no doubt knows, the legacy of the Jim Crow South remains with us today. We can all drink from the same water fountains now, and sit anywhere there is an open seat on a bus, but the idea that we are all equal is a dream, or, in the parlance of an economist, a statistical fallacy.

Education is still the line in the sand between the haves and the have nots.

The numbers tell the story.

Half of high school students fail to graduate in urban centers, the majority Latino or black.

The great majority of the poor: Latino or black.

Who is to blame? Does it matter? We all pay in the end.

That is why it would be unfortunate if only part of this Nobel Laureate's speech at a Nov. 19 conference on literacy in Springfield would be taken as gospel. At this conference, called "Building a Better Workforce," Heckman told about 200 business people that an investment in early education yields a much greater bang for the buck than an investment in adolescent or adult education.

In fact, comparatively, Heckman said, many programs for students later in life had a limited track record in terms of yields on investments.

Heckman, the economist measuring outcomes by the numbers, was right. And that is probably why this state's investment in early education is more than 17 times its investment in adult education. But Heckman, the scientist and the man, also acknowledged that adolescent and adult education services are needed and should be enhanced to achieve better results because learning gains often take longer.

The business and political leaders in the audience that day already see the results of the adult literacy gap. The region recently led the state for the percentage increase in unfilled jobs, partly because the workforce does not have the education or skills to fill them.

In my travels, I have met or heard about adult education students who go on to get, not only GEDs, but higher education. They become nurses, or social workers, or entrepreneurs. As a result, their children are inspired to do more.

I also know that more than 900 youths were placed in jobs or internships this year, thanks to a variety of businesses, grants and the work of Brad Sperry and Kathryn Kirby of the Regional Employment Board. Without those opportunities, many would be simply dropouts with no future.

Heckman is a visionary, particularly in his embrace of early education, but the challenge of all visionaries is that they are at least a generation ahead of their time. While we embrace the visionary's vision, we must not forget the world we live in.

The vision of providing early education to all is essential to erasing the great class divide in this country. However, the vision of education is myopic if it is limited to the children. Children need support at home to excel and that means parents need an education of their own.

If, a generation ago, we had heeded Heckman's message, perhaps we would not be in this state. But we didn't, and so, we must deal with the problem at its core and the problem as it is now, while planning for the future.

By the numbers, the economist Heckman long ago calculated that investments in early childhood education yield the greatest return. By life experience, Heckman also knows that some returns, however limited at the outset, reap their own rewards down the line, for individuals, families and society.

After hearing a panel speak about the value of adult education to the business community, Heckman wanted to learn more.

That's the mark of a great economist and a human being who recognizes that knowledge is limitless. It should be the demarcation line for policy makers when deciding who is left on the other side of the bottom line.

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