



Schleisser: A Literacy Works success story.

Literacy works

BY CHRISTINE DEMKOWYCH

Michelle Schleisser was 24 when she endured a painful divorce, lost her townhouse, and then had to find a job and new home for herself and her four kids.

Luckily, the building where she rented a subsidized apartment—Circle Terrace Apartments in Baltimore County's economically depressed neighborhood of Landsdowne—also happened to be home to a community learning center supported by Literacy Works, a nonprofit organization that has been promoting adult and family literacy services since 1989.

Schleisser says that when she discovered classes were being offered in her building, she immediately signed up for English and Math. "Even though I had already graduated from high school, I felt I needed a refresher," she explains, adding that she also took several computer classes because she knew such skills were important in the job market.

The Literacy Works programs—a \$500,000-a-year effort funded by T. Rowe Price, the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, and the Henry and Ruth Blaustein Rosenberg Foundation, as well as the federal and state governments and

the Baltimore Community Foundation—turned Schleisser's life around. Now she's an administrative assistant at Circle T Internet Café, the learning center in her building that is co-sponsored by Literacy Works, Housing Opportunities Unlimited, and the Community College of Baltimore. "When the opportunity came up, I jumped on it," she recalls. "And I got the job."

Now she's helping others make the same leap by providing students with computer assistance, resume skills, and job searches.

About 75 percent of unemployed adults have reading or writing difficulties, says Helene Waranch, executive director of Literacy Works, and the organization's classes tackle the problem in small groups with lots of one-on-one instruction: The classes generally have no more than 15 students and are taught by instructors from CCBC and volunteers. Students range in age from 16 to 60 and skill levels range from those who cannot read to those preparing for the GED.

Some classes are free of charge and some cost \$75 and include 60 hours of computer time. Employers, however, pay

\$150 per student per month for all comprehensive skills-enhancement courses.

This year, Literacy Works, which was originally offering services in Baltimore County only, partnered with the 21st Century Threshold Project, a non-traditional children's learning initiative funded by the U.S. Department of Education, to create outreach centers at Paul's Place and George Washington Elementary School in southwest Baltimore.

The newly-affiliated centers at Paul's Place and George Washington Elementary school offer after-school, Saturday and summer children's programs, including a hot lunch program, a job readiness program, shower and laundry facilities, women's support and Narcotics Anonymous programs, clothing distribution and emergency food and utility assistance.

Katherine Richardson, 57, is a six-year volunteer at Paul's Place who is now getting ready to take the GED. She says she eventually wants to become a fire paramedic. "Working as an ambassador at Paul's Place has been very helpful to me," she says. "I don't know what I would have done without their help. At one point, I didn't even have a place to live."

To help with the cause, Verizon Communications recently presented Literacy Works with a \$20,000 grant to use toward its distance learning program, which enables adults to improve their skills from their homes or offices. Kemper Insurance, IWIF, and the Baltimore County Office of Employment Training are also participants in the distance learning program.

Since obtaining her job at Circle T Internet Cafe, Schleisser has begun to achieve other goals she once thought impossible. Just last month she got her driver's license. Prior to that, she received certification as a first-aid tech in CPR.

And Schleisser says she will soon embark on something that she has always dreamed of doing. "I've always wanted to work as a nurse in a hospital," she says, and is planning to enroll in evening classes at CCBC. "Until recently, I never thought I could do it."