

Writing On The Wall

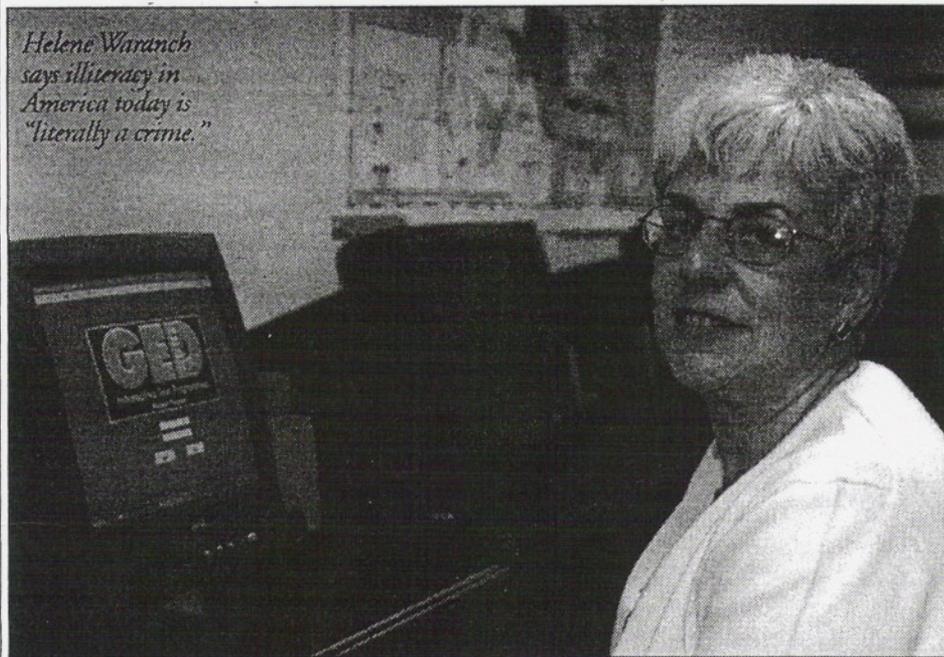


PHOTO MELISSA GOLDMAN

Helene Waranch says illiteracy in America today is "literally a crime."

By heading Literacy Works, Helene Waranch feels that she's making a difference in the lives of society's disenfranchised.

MELISSA GOLDMAN
Staff Reporter

"Don't you feel good? You should!" Helene Waranch says to student Rick Ford, as he tells her about his latest accomplishment toward his goal of earning a high school diploma. Mr. Ford, 30, has been a student at Literacy Works for two years.

Ms. Waranch, executive director of the non-profit group, beams at his success. "He's the computer guru now. It's wonderful," she says. "There are all kinds of people in here, and it's wonderful to see their lives turn around."

Ms. Waranch, a one-time business owner who also boasts a background in early childhood education, has headed Literacy Works for the past 5½ years, after a stint on the organization's board.

"And I love it," she says. "It gives me a chance to do all the things I love — the helping others to help themselves, the *tikkun olam*, the acts of loving kindness. And I know I'm making a difference.

Dolores Moran met Ms. Waranch when she began volunteering for the organization three years ago.

"She's very involved," says Ms. Moran. "As for myself, I just find it's so rewarding. At the beginning, [the students are] very shy and lacking confidence and kind of

afraid to participate or answer questions out loud. But then, by the middle of the year, you can see how they're really blossoming, and by the end of the year they're almost like different people.

Literacy Works' volunteer program, a partnership with the Community College of Baltimore County system, trained and placed 250 volunteers last year. And it is always looking for more.

The organization was formed in 1989 with a mission to improve adult and family literacy, and that means more than just reading.

"Literacy is being able to function in today's complex world, being able to read and write and compute to be successful," says Ms. Waranch, a Pikesville resident who belongs to Baltimore Hebrew Congregation. "And it's to be successful in the home and in the workplace and with your family."

Ms. Waranch, who also serves as president of Women of Reform Judaism, was recently named an "Innovator of the Year" by the *Daily Record* for her organization's accomplishments. It pains her that one in five adults in the United States are at a fifth grade or below reading level.

"They have trouble reading the directions on the back of a frozen dinner," she says. They pay their pay phone bills without knowing if it was right."

Unfortunately, she says, Maryland ranks 48th out of 50 states in the amount of funding allocated to adult literacy. "Ironically, if parents go back to school, their kids automatically do better in school," Ms. Waranch says, shaking her short crop of salt-and-pepper hair. "So if we would put more money into adult literacy and adult education, our kids would do better."

In the last fiscal year, Literacy Works served 520 "learners" of all ages throughout Baltimore City and County. Rick Ford is just one of its success stories.

"Right now, I'm just trying to get the computer online for everyone," says Mr. Ford, a Middle River resident, as he maneuvers his wheelchair in front of the keyboard at the organization's Rosedale headquarters. Mr. Ford originally came to Literacy Works to take the GED, but he has now taken on a more comprehensive diploma program and developed a special affinity for computers.

"It's a big sense of accomplishment because you can look back and see what it was like for you when you were learning and to look into the future and see how far you've come and what you're going to progress to," he says.

Students come to Literacy Works from a variety of backgrounds, and this has proved to be a benefit for all.

"They learn from each other, which is wonderful, and I think it gives the American students a sense of well-being because they're helping people from other countries as well as learning from them," says Ms. Waranch, noting that right now the program has students from Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe and Mexico, among many other locales. "When there's a mix of ages, I think the kids do better. A lot of the older people will kind of adopt them and tell them, 'Don't do what I've done.' It's a nice mix, very heterogeneous. We take people where they are. We have one-room schoolhouses, basically.

"I have a passion for this," Ms. Waranch says. "It's a crime, it's literally a crime, that in this country that more people cannot read." □

Literacy Works will present its 11th annual Book Bash fund-raiser from 6:30 to 9:30 p.m. on Sunday, Oct. 26 at Borders Books and Music in Towson. To learn more about the event, which features more than 50 authors, a silent auction and celebrity readings, call 410-887-2001.