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## **Ontario Literacy Volunteers group celebrates 40 years**

### **Clients set goals as they improve their reading skills**

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Staff writer

CANANDAIGUA — The progress that George Beech has made in his reading skills was apparent during a recent session with tutor Elizabeth Messmer at the Literacy Volunteers of Ontario County office.

In a strong and steady voice, Beech read aloud from a biography of Nelson Mandela, who led the struggle for racial equality in South Africa.

Messmer, a retired teacher, showed her approval by saying "exactly" and "that's right," as he correctly pronounced difficult words.

"Reading is a wonderful thing," said Beech, 49, of Farmington about the sense of accomplishment he feels from his twice-a-week sessions at the office at 208 S. Main St. in Canandaigua.

"You become almost like friends," said Messmer about the relationship that often develops between the 70 volunteer tutors and those they help.

Beech is one of about 80 adults residing in Ontario County that the group expects to assist this year.

Now celebrating its 40th birthday, Literacy Volunteers stresses one-on-one tutoring, with the person being helped defining the goals. The tutoring is free and confidential.

"Trust is really important," said Linda Proctor, director of the group.

Volunteers have always been the backbone of the group, which has an annual budget of about \$110,000 that largely comes from contributions and fundraising.

Tutors are always needed, and there is now a short waiting list of people wanting assistance.

The group — one of 41 such organizations in the state — was originally based in Geneva. It was inspired by the formation of a Syracuse group to help the more than 11,000 adults there believed to be functioning at a low level of literacy. Almost as many adults are currently believed to be in need of help in Ontario County, Proctor said.

Literacy Volunteers' storefront office gives the group a certain visibility intended to invite people in for assistance. Tutors also meet there for training, such as when nine tutors recently gathered for a session led by Mary Ellen Darling, a retired school administrator from Clifton Springs who is now volunteering.

Mary Murphy, one of the two part-time staff members who work with Proctor, coordinates the tutoring, which usually occurs at the office, but also takes place at local libraries and churches.

Some who come in, such as Beech, want to earn their high school equivalency diplomas by passing the general educational development test, known as the GED. Others have such goals as needing to improve skills for the jobs they have, and wanting to take the written driver's test.

"It is also important for our adult students to be involved in their children's education. If children don't have literate parents, the chances of the children being illiterate are high," Proctor said.

Proctor reaches out to government agencies and community groups, to let them know that the agency is there to help.

"We have a committed group of people," said board member Laurence Karz.

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**To learn more**

For more information about Literacy  
Volunteers of Ontario County, call (585)  
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