

# B-BALL: Becoming a Better Adult Learner and Leader — A Teacher's Perspective

by Janet Kaplan-Bucciarelli

*"It is the act of learning — mostly about ourselves — that is the key to our contribution to, and our ability to make a difference in, the world. Specifically: it is learning about our capacities, strengths, and gifts."*

— Peter Block, *The Answer to How is Yes*

When I began doing intakes with prospective learners in our literacy program, I realized I needed to bring tissues with me. So many people were ashamed to be sitting with me, telling me things about themselves they'd much prefer to keep quiet...in a way. I needed the tissues myself, sometimes — not because people's stories were so sad or painful (which they often were), but because seeing other people's shame up close like that touched me and reminded me of my own.

The opportunity to start up a new leadership program at Read/Write/Now was one of the things that most drew me to the job. When I recruited learners to participate, I told them a parable of the beggar who'd been sitting on a box for thirty years, asking travelers for change. One passer-by suggested the beggar look inside the box — just to see what was in there. Eventually, the beggar did just that and was shocked to find that he'd been sitting on a box filled with gold! I told the learners this parable and asked them what they thought it was about. After they shared some ideas, I told them our class would be modeled on the theme of the parable — that they would learn more about their own resources and talents, and they would then use those to help other people to



*Janet Kaplan-Bucciarelli with her son.*

"Become Better Adult Learners and Leaders (B-BALL)." When I passed around a sign-up sheet, the class filled immediately.

I usually started off classes with short team-building games. Afterwards, we'd always debrief. "What did you learn from that?" I'd ask. As we talked about what everyone was learning, people came to understand each other and themselves better. Some activities were hard for one person, but simple for another. Some people took on new challenges with enthusiasm, while others balked. We talked about how these insights might help them in their regular reading, writing, and math classes or how they might be more tolerant of others because of what they were learning.

We also talked about the barriers that might prevent adults from coming to school. Students

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had great ideas about how to encourage people to move past those barriers. Ideas for projects flowed. For those adults who were already readers, they decided to make a calendar with photos of learners from our program, quotes from them about their experiences, and learning tips. They called it, "It's Never Too Late to Learn." For those adults who might not yet be literate, they decided to make an inspiring film with interviews from adults in our program. They called the film "Learning is Power."

We finished both projects in the fall of 2006 and distributed them to local organizations that come in contact with our target population, as well as to all of our learners. Recently, in fact, the film was sent to 22 legislators in advance of Adult Literacy Awareness Day at the State House (see interview on p. 18 with Ernest Best), and over 1000 people have viewed it since we posted it on <[www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)>. The department of tran-



*Rini Templeton*

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sitional assistance has requested a copy to show in their waiting area and the Springfield Public Schools have expressed interest in connecting our learners (many of whom dropped out as teens) with current high school kids (50% of whom may drop out).

In April 2007, we began presenting the film in the community – and that meant working on presentation skills and public speaking. B-BALL par-

ticipants have now shown the film and talked to other adults at a homeless shelter in Holyoke, at the Ludlow jail, and at the Massachusetts Alliance for Adult Literacy student leadership conference. They have also created a new brochure and business cards for our program which they can now hand out on the bus, etc.

Outreach efforts will continue, for there will always be adults who need ABE classes. What B-BALL and similar leadership classes remind us, however, is that the key needed to open the box labeled "Reading, Writing, and Math" is often hidden inside.

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*Janet Kaplan-Bucciarelli is a teacher/trainer/consultant who has spent the past 15 years developing an approach that empowers and inspires learners to try what is new or foreign to them. Currently, she is producing (and teaching others to create) short personal films, called digital stories, which help get the voice and talent of regular folks out into the world. She can be reached at [Janet@StoriesThatMove.com](mailto:Janet@StoriesThatMove.com). "Learning is Power" can be viewed on <[www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)> by searching for it by name. To order a DVD of "Learning is Power," please contact Janet Kelly at Read/Write/Now: 413-263-6839.*

# **B-BALL: Becoming a Better Adult Learner and Leader – A Learner’s Perspective**

*by Hilda L. Johnston*

Since B-BALL started in the winter of 2005, the program has enriched our lives with new learning techniques, teaching us how to have a more positive attitude, and how to handle situations inside the classroom, as well as outside of it.

B-BALL has helped many of us grow in ways that we never thought possible. We have learned that we possess gifts that we did not know we had. For instance, I discovered that I had leadership and teaching skills that I never knew about before. We have also learned to accept challenges that before we found impossible. For me, a personal barrier was that my math skills were holding me back. Maybe that barrier does not sound like much, but it prevented me from wanting to stay in school. It made me feel like I was such a failure. B-BALL has helped me to see past the math barrier.

Some of us who dropped out of high school

are using that experience to try to talk to current high-schoolers and to encourage them to stay in school. We have discovered a new power inside ourselves that we can use to make our lives and the lives of others better.

The members of the B-BALL Squad feel that we are just one big, happy family. We are role model for our children and grandchildren. This is such a positive program. We have found a new sense of freedom and we are very excited about what we are doing. We are especially grateful to Janet Kaplan-Bucciarelli for all her instruction, help, and ideas. Her positive attitude has helped to make the people in the B-BALL Squad Become Better Adult Learners and Leaders.

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*Hilda Johnston, formerly a student at the Read/Write/Now program in Springfield, MA, is working to get her GED so that she can go to college.*



*Hilda Johnston (back row, third from right) is pictured with her teacher Janet Kaplan-Bucciarelli (back row, left) and other members of the B-BALL squad in Springfield, MA.*