

Commitment, Respect, and Humor: A Conversation Between a Learner and a Tutor

by Angele Ellis and Gary P.

Since March 2006, Angele and Gary have been meeting twice a week at the public library to improve Gary's literacy skills. In this conversation they reflect on what the tutoring sessions have meant to each of them.

GARY: Angele and I focus on the things that I need and want to learn; that keeps me coming back to the Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council (GPLC). Some good examples are reading my mail, completing job applications, following written directions (like the directions for cleaning my wood stove), making shopping lists, and reading menus. I've also learned to read for pleasure. Fishing is one of my hobbies, so we've read books and magazines on fishing, most of which I found in the public library.



Gary P. and Angele Ellis

Gary and I clicked from the beginning because we respect each other, are committed to the work, and keep our sense of humor when things get frustrating.

ANGELE: When we started working together, Gary never had used the public library. Now he is on great terms with the librarians, who help him to find books on the topics he's interested in — including the books he reads for pleasure.

GARY: Last summer, I went to hear a motivational

speaker, and I bought one of his books. At first, it was hard for me to read, but now the words are coming more easily to me — and that's exciting.

ANGELE: I was nervous when Gary and I started working together, because I'd never done literacy tutoring before, and because I knew that this was Gary's third try at completing a program with GPLC. But Gary and I clicked from the beginning because we respect each other, are committed to the work, and keep our sense of humor when things get frustrating.

GARY: When the going gets tough, we keep each other going. Recently, Angele convinced me that I needed to learn keyboarding, instead of hunting and pecking on the computer. I didn't think I could do it at first, but then Angele said, "Do you think I stay up nights thinking of ways to torture you?"

After showing me where to place my fingers on the keys and reviewing the alphabet, Angele asked me to type my name over and over. After I did about six lines, I started to see how much faster it was. I started to remember where the keys were, and I realized that I could do this.

ANGELE: Progress hasn't come overnight. We go through slow periods, but then Gary makes big leaps.

GARY: I don't mind the slow periods as much, because I really can see the leaps. One of the biggest is that I'm much more confident in myself. A year

ago, I never thought that I would be giving talks to new GPLC tutors — or reading aloud in my men's church fellowship group. I enjoy doing both of these things now. The confidence came when I realized that I wasn't stupid — that I had the ability to read like everybody else. I want to encourage that confidence in other people.

ANGELE: GPLC's motto is "Open Up A Life." I realized how true that is when I saw that working with Gary on reading and writing was having such positive effects on the rest of his life. EVERY-

The confidence came when I realized that I wasn't stupid — that I had the ability to read like everybody else. I want to encourage that confidence in other people.

THING in the tutor-student relationship is a lesson that goes both ways. One day I said to Gary, "I'm impressed by how you go up to people now, introduce yourself, and ask for what you want." He said, "I learned that from you, Angele."

GARY: In order to learn, you have to make learning a priority. For example, I love to go hunting with my uncle, but on the trips we've taken in the past year I've said to him, "Remember, you have to get me back in time to make my tutoring sessions."

ANGELE: I think that family support is important. Gary's family really has encouraged him and cheered him on. His nephew, who is a teacher, convinced Gary to come back to GPLC last year; his cousin, also a teacher, has asked Gary to come to speak to her students. They help Gary keep a sense of humor too. When Gary's brother was treating the family to a restaurant dinner, and

Gary ordered roast beef from the menu, his brother joked: "I liked it better before you could read!"

GARY: I find that going to parties is easier for me now. I used to get nervous and hang back. Now, I can talk to people about more things. After Angele and I read a magazine article about Old Faithful, the geyser at Yellowstone National Park, I was able to talk about that with my niece and her husband, who used to live out West.

ANGELE: Periodically, Gary and I talk about his goals to make sure that our lessons still are relevant to his life. Although he has a disability, Gary wants to work part-time — and we'll continue to fill out job applications that suit his needs. Our keyboarding lessons will help Gary to compose emails and visit web sites more easily. Gary wants to become a better speller — something that will help him in using the computer — and he wants to increase his reading vocabulary.

GARY: I would tell anyone who wants to learn to improve his or her reading to go to a program like GPLC. There's nothing to be scared about. It's one place where you can let your guard down — the guard that you've carried all of your life — and let other people help you learn to read.

POSTSCRIPT: *After this article was written, Gary accomplished his goal of getting a part-time job — in large part because he learned how to fill out job applications on his own. He also worked on a successful campaign for a candidate for the Pittsburgh Public School Board. The new school board member told Gary that she will not forget the promise that led Gary to support her: she will work to ensure that the Pittsburgh Public Schools give all students a real education, not just diplomas.*

Gary P. gives talks to GPLC tutors about his experiences as a student. He serves as a Eucharistic Minister at his church. Angele Ellis is a tutor for the Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council (GPLC). For more information on the Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council, go to <www.gplc.org>.