

Learning at work changes lives

By Jody Lundrigan
The Ontario Literacy Coalition

Literacy

The Fairmont Royal York is a big hotel. Helen Liu is a small woman. Together they are making learning opportunities possible.

Eighteen years ago, Helen arrived in this country and, after a series of odd jobs, she went to work at the Fairmont Royal York, in Toronto. With a keen understanding of the importance of learning, Helen joined the hotel's Workplace Literacy program.

"If you don't learn, you are always at the bottom. You always get the worst jobs," says Helen. "That's why literacy is so important."

The Fairmont Royal York and their union, UNITE HERE Local 75, recognize the benefits of having confident and skilled employees. Equally important, employees recognize the benefits themselves.

"My co-workers want to be educated," Helen asserts. "Our computer program is very popular. People are offering to bring their own laptops just to get in."

Sarah Rousseau, training coordinator for Hospitality Workers Training Centre at UNITE HERE Local 75, confirms program appreciation. UNITE HERE represents over 350,000 workers in the hospitality sector in North America with locals in the Toronto and Ottawa areas. Sarah facilitates the Workplace Literacy and Essential Skills programs at the Fairmont Royal York and is a passionate spokesperson for learning at work.

"I know we are doing something good," says Sarah. "I speak with people like Helen and I know the difference it makes and the importance of the environment we are creating."

The Fairmont Royal York hosts just one of 14 Workplace Literacy and Essential Skills pilot sites across the province of Ontario. Each program is tailored to meet the needs of employees and employers at each site.

But is training really necessary inside the workplace?

It would appear crucial according to a 2006 Statistics Canada report that notes 62 per cent per cent of adults, who scored at the absolute lowest level of literacy, are employed.

The same report states that only 10 per cent of people who require literacy and essential skills upgrading are actually accessing training. Workplace Literacy programs reach these learners.

"After a long day of work, you go home, cook, clean and take care of your family. There is no time for you; learning is not possible," says Helen. "But if you receive training in the workplace, it is in your second home. You save time and money and you know the people in your program."

Workplace programs across Ontario, spearheaded by the Ontario Literacy Coalition (OLC), make vitally important learning opportunities possible in the workplace. With funding from the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, Workplace Literacy programs aim to improve employee skills and confidence, while reducing turnover and improving productivity. This is key to Ontario's economic success, especially in a knowledge-based economy.



Helen Liu

"A greater range of adult literacy opportunities help Ontarians adjust to the demands of the knowledge economy," said Lesley Brown, executive director for the OLC. "We look forward to building on the success of workplace programs to help increase the skill of Ontario's labour force."

Lesley points out that literacy in the 21st century goes beyond the traditional definition of reading and writing. In a technology-based society, the learning curve can be steep as people try to adapt to new tools.

With increasingly diverse workplaces, communication and problem-solving skills are becoming more important. Language and literacy are also major issues at work and in the community. In addition, skills and knowledge that are not being continuously used can be lost. This fact becomes more prevalent as our population ages.

OLC understands literacy issues change as the world changes, hence, their mission to make learning opportunities possible. Their focus on Workplace Literacy and Essential Skills responds to the needs of workers (and potential workers), businesses, labour groups and governments as skills training is fundamentally important to a productive workplace, an engaged workforce and a prosperous Ontario.

Statistics surrounding learning and work, as well as more information about literacy and essential skills, can be found on the OLC website at www.on.literacy.ca.

Literacy is a vehicle for positive change in both good and bad economic times. OLC aims to provide effective Workplace Literacy and Essential Skills programming to address the needs of Ontario, whatever the economic environment.

They can only accomplish this with literacy champions like the team from the Fairmont Royal York. Working together, the Fairmont Royal York, UNITE HERE Local 75 and employees like Helen Liu promote learning in the workplace.

"In most companies, the training department is the first to go," notes Sarah. "But the Royal York (management and union) values education and without their support we could not have these programs."

The Fairmont Royal York and 14 other employers across Ontario have opened their doors to Workplace Literacy programs because it is good for business and because it is good for people.

"I see the importance of learning in these classes," states Sarah. "The employees are stronger and use the skills they learn at work and at home."

For Helen and her co-workers, it is also about respect.

"Sometimes people think other people are useless, but they just haven't been given a chance," Helen points out. "One of my co-workers could not speak English and now works in a public area. That is huge. We are lucky to have these programs."

Jody Lundrigan is the manager of Communications and Marketing for the Ontario Literacy Coalition.

Workshop for writers at Ottawa Authors & Artisans Fair Nov. 20-21

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More than 40 Ottawa authors and artisans will display and sell their work on Nov. 20 and 21.

The event runs from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. at Dominican University College, 96 Empress Avenue (near Bronson and Somerset).

There is free admission and parking.

During the sale, on Nov. 20, there will be a half-day workshop for writers. The topic is "Networking and How Authors Can Use it Successfully."

Ottawa children's author Brian Doyle will sign copies of his books on Nov. 21 at 1 p.m.

For book fair/workshop information or to book a table, contact George Laidlaw: (613) 831-2505 or laidlaw@iosphere.net or visit www.oiw.ca.



Randy Ray is an Ottawa author and director of publicity for Ottawa Independent Writers, which has added artisans and guest authors to the lineup for this year's event.