

How I Learned to Fall in Love with a Story

By Lester Benton

Lester Benton learned to read late in life with the assistance of a program funded by the Barbara Bush Foundation. His inspirational story is proof it's never too late to learn. ...

I have struggled with reading since I was in elementary school in Houston. I was labeled a slow learner when I was about 12 and put in an alternative school. The chance to learn stopped with that school where all we did was play games. By the time I convinced my mother to help get me back into regular school, I was two years behind. I was moved along in high school and graduated, and I tried college—but it didn't work. All my life I was embarrassed about my reading and writing problems, and I hid them away as best I could. But these problems affected my life in many ways, from my marriage to my ability to make a good living. I had low paying jobs for most of my life.

And then, two things happened that changed by life. My sons, Kevin and Christopher helped me with reading as they were developing their own reading skills. Christopher, when he was just eight years old and in the third grade, was helping me with the meaning of some words. He said to me, "Dad, you are old, why can't you read?" I realized at that moment that I was going to go somewhere to find someone to help me. I Googled READING on the computer and began searching for help. I found it ... the Literacy Advance of Houston and in a very short time, after putting aside the embarrassment, I was working with my first volunteer tutor. Lucky for me, he was a Frenchman. He would say to me "you have to fall in love with the story."



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One day, he had me read a section in a book and then write down what it meant to me. I read and I

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wrote—crossed it out, wrote it again and crossed it out. This continued until I finally wrote something that really made sense to me. I realized I had just written the first paragraph I could remember. Tears came to my eyes, and I could not stop crying.

My second tutor has helped me make more progress in my reading skills. I finished reading my first book, "The Things They Carried," a wonderful book about soldiers in the Vietnam

War by Tim O'Brien. I learned what it is like to "fall in love with a story." So after years of struggle, my life has changed. I am taking courses at Houston Community College. I will get my degree, one course at a time. I have the best job I have ever had at Walgreens Distribution Center.

I hope my experience will teach my children and others that it is never too late to learn and that you should never, ever give up. I no longer feel the shame as I am able to read and write. I continue to push myself, and I know I can overcome any problem standing in my way. I want to thank everyone at Literacy Advance for changing my life. I want to thank Barbara Bush and all of you who support the important cause of literacy. ○