



EMILY ELLISON -- Speech Delivered at Literacy Action's Writers for Readers Fundraising Luncheon, Atlanta History Center, February 4, 2010

The many educators who are in the room today know that the **greatest indicator of a child's success in school is the educational level of his or her parents** – especially the mother.

When we have close to a million adults in Atlanta who are functionally illiterate, the children those adults are raising are starting school **having heard less than one third of the words** heard by a child coming from an educated home. The children from low literate families begin preschool with a distinct disadvantage, making it sometimes impossible for even the most skilled and well-meaning teachers and the best financed school systems to keep those children on par with their peers.

The result is that children coming from low literate homes have an **85% greater chance of dropping out of school than their fellow students**.

And thus, the intergeneration cycle of illiteracy and poverty continues

Since all of us care about the children who are trapped in that cycle, we must also care about and invest in the parents, the grandparents, and the great-grandparents who are raising them. **When we talk about quality education in Atlanta (and in America)**, we cannot leave the undereducated adult learner out of the conversation.

When we talk about Atlanta being a **global competitor**, we must remember that an **underskilled, undereducated workforce is a dramatic and direct economic impact issue** and is a **deterrent to businesses relocating to our city**.

It's important also to remember that LITERACY is not "just" about reading. Our adult students come to Literacy Action on average with a **5th grade reading level**. But their **computational skills are almost always even lower** than their reading levels.

When we partner with our students, we're not just providing 6 levels of reading instruction, we're providing **4 levels of math classes** as well as **computer classes and work skills classes**.

We're **incorporating health literacy and financial literacy across the curriculum.** And we're doing everything possible to assist our adult students in become self-sufficient, productive and responsible citizens, parents, and employees.

Obviously, we cannot do this work alone. One small agency like Literacy Action, with a fulltime staff of only five and a bare bones' budget, can serve only several hundred students a year. For each one of those 600 to 700 students and their families, our work is critical. But in a city where more than 800,000 adults are functionally illiterate, that is NOT ENOUGH.

That is why we are partnering with other agencies across the city and state to expand outreach, reduce redundancy of services, and provide the most efficient and effective instruction possible to adult learners. Some of the agencies we are privileged to work with or are starting partnerships with in the near future are in this room and include:

- The Atlanta Housing Authority
- The Atlanta Urban League
- The Technical College System of Georgia
- Communities in Schools
- The Center for Working Families
- Families First
- Literacy Volunteers of Atlanta
- Fulton County's Human Services Department of Work Force Development
- The Latin American Association and many others.

These nonprofit organizations and government agencies are working day in and day out, year after year, with minimal budgets just like we are. And at the heart of their clients' major challenges, at the heart of nearly all social service issues and social ills is the same thing – **a lack of education.**

It's not just embarrassing that we have nearly a million adults in Atlanta who are functionally illiterate, it is unconscionable.

Literacy is one of the most powerful tools we have to lift families out of poverty. And when one family's future is improved, those living around them are forever changed as well.

Dr. Ruth Parker, who is one of our trustees and the person who coined the term “health literacy,” often talks about the courage of adult learners. It does take courage to return to school after you’ve been out of the classroom sometimes for decades. It takes courage to do what sometimes seems like a selfish thing and go to school when you feel you should be making money for your family, when sometimes you don’t have the MARTA fare to get to class or the money to pay for childcare, when you’re afraid that you won’t be able to keep up in class or when you’re afraid that someone is going to find out that you cannot read.

I hope all of us will have the courage too to step up and ask our elected officials and our business leaders to support literacy programs like ours and those of our partners. I hope that all of us will commit to having a fully literate Atlanta, a city in which every parent can read to his child, where every prospective employee has the literacy skills to fill out a job application and understand the forms she is being asked to sign.

Last year I mentioned an episode that Dr. Ruth Parker told me about that I believe is worth repeating. Ruth tells the story of a functionally illiterate mother with a very sick young child with a severe ear infection. A doctor prescribed Emoxicillin, but because the mother could not read the directions on the medicine bottle, instead of giving the medication orally, she poured the liquid antibiotic into the child’s ear.

When you cannot read, it takes courage just to get through the day.

For more than 41 years now, courageous adults have been coming to Literacy Action to gain the educational and work and life skills to provide security for themselves and their families.

We cannot do this work alone.

We need the support of all of you in this room and the support of all those you know who have the means to help.

In the foreword to a book I once published, I wrote that of all the things my parents gave me – the vacations, the summer camps, the ballet and piano lessons, the lessons for all those things of which I proved to have no talent – the greatest gift they gave me was when my father sat beside my bed each night and read to me.

We had few traditional children's books in our home, so Dad read to me whatever he was reading – the evening newspaper, biographies of great men, the Bible, his beloved Last of the Mohicans, sometimes even excerpts from the encyclopedia. It really didn't matter – he could have been reading to me from the backs of cereal boxes.

What mattered was the time with him, his sounding out of words, which gave me a love of language, a broad vocabulary, an unconscious understanding of syntax. His reading transported me to worlds I would never have known otherwise and, I hope, gave me a heightened sensitivity for those whose backgrounds were so different from my own.

This same gift was shared with our daughter. We still have inside jokes that go back to our days of reading FROG AND TOAD, THE WIND IN THE WILLOWS, AMELIA BEDELIA, and so many more. Today, with her 22 years old and living in New York City, our most constant form of communication with one another is text messaging, and she will often text me at midnight, "Good Night Moon, Mom." And I will text back, "Good Night Moon, Elli."

All the things we have talked about today are hugely, hugely important – the staggering statistics about undereducated adults, the economic impact of low literacy. But on some days, on many days, it feels that one of the most important things we can do as an agency, as a community, as a society, is to make sure that no child is deprived of being read to by her parents and that no parent is deprived of the joy of reading to his child.

On behalf of all those children and parents, on behalf of my wonderful, hardworking staff, our dedicated, hardworking board, and our motivated, tenacious, hardworking and courageous students, I thank you for being here today, for holding high the banner for literacy, for your past support, and for your future generosity. Again, thank you.