

This article tells the story of how the Augustine Literacy Project of the Upstate began.

In the Beginning

I lived in the South Carolina foothills for about ten years. While there, I met children whose parents were too poor or troubled to provide much for them. Often threadbare, some were scrupulously clean, others not. As I substituted in the elementary schools, it was clear that several of these students had an additional problem. Though sweet natured, they were not able to process the written work efficiently or at all, despite participating in special classes. When I substituted in schools for older students, I found the same things, except, instead of sweet natures, I noticed sadness, withdrawal, frustration, hopelessness, and rebellion. None of these kids, regardless of age, were well dressed or had their school lunch money.

As life moved on, I found myself living in town and specializing in teaching dyslexic children. Schools for dyslexic children are expensive to run because of the very low pupil to teacher ratio. The tuition can often be as much as for college, and a child often needs years and years of appropriate education to flex his wings and fly.

I sat at my desk one afternoon after the halls cleared and the last car-pool door slammed, and thought about my country kids, how they would never be able to access the type of education they needed. And I knew that, here in town, many minority students were in the same boat. Seventy-

five percent of prison inmates have inadequate reading skills, and the inmate population is weighted towards African American males.

At first, I volunteered in a government sponsored summer program in an African-American neighborhood. I was graciously received and appreciated, but I was an unknown, the special skills I brought to the task of teaching reading were not understood, and mandated programs were in place.

Leading up to another summer, I asked around and tried to meet folks who had the ear of the community, so that I could explain what I could offer and try to develop some way to tutor the children. Being a white person in a non-white neighborhood, I literally could not even get in the door. Besides that, I was just one person who saw the need and had a skill.

At some point, I decided to just *do* what I wanted to do -- tutor at-risk children -- instead of trying to organize or develop. I began tutoring for free twice a week in a lovely, organic, low-income-neighborhood summer and after-school ministry. The kids were packages full of energy, hope, and enthusiasm for life itself -- *not* for being tutored after school!

I tried to enlist other teachers at my school in tutoring for free. Most were exhausted after a full day and the inevitable paperwork. Those who did tutor privately before going home to families did it because they needed to supplement their income.

So, for a sweet period, I fed on the charm and beauty of working with "my kids." Their progress was satisfying and their love for life gave me energy and joy. I am so grateful to that group for allowing me in. But the

unmet needs of thousands of economically challenged children weighed on me.

My daughter also became a teacher of dyslexic students and lived in Charlotte. She knew of my hopes of seeing more done. One day she called me and mentioned a program in North Carolina that did something similar to what I wanted to do. I called in the fall and spoke with Debbie McCarthy, the Executive Director of the Augustine Literacy Project. She was very gracious, pleased I had called, and generously sent me their lesson plan and sequence. Freely sharing those items was HUGE. Many people sold their materials for teaching with the powerful Orton-Gillingham approach for dyslexics. Here I was being gladly received by someone who was doing what I wanted to do! After receiving and reviewing the documents, I knew I was looking at not only a generous, open-spirited project, but an effective one, too. *Halleluia!* I would not have to invent the wheel, just pedal the ones already there.

Many people were offered scholarships for attending the two-week Augustine training in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, but since I was not a Tarheel, I didn't qualify. I wrote the check and began a journey that has brought me a life of wonderful friends and endearing students. After I took the training and did a year of ALP tutoring after school, it was time to bring a chapter of the ALP to upstate South Carolina. For that, I needed volunteers and my church's backing. That's a drama for another time, but as you can tell, here we are. It was *grace* all the way.

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