

The Battalion

The power of literacy

International Literacy Day celebrates its 44 year anniversary

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On Sept 8, 1967 the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) founded International Literacy Day in an effort to promote worldwide literacy. Illiteracy is not only a problem reserved for developing countries; it has a negative effect socially and economically throughout the U.S.

There are 42 million Americans living in the United States who cannot read. 50 percent of all adults living in U.S. federal and state correctional institutions cannot read or write at all. Yet statistics show that juveniles receiving reading instruction while in prison reduced illiteracy by 20 percent, according to the Alliance for Excellent Education.

William Stockdale, a senior philosophy major, did not feel prepared for the level of reading demanded at a college level when he first started out at A&M.

"A friend introduced me to Dostoyevsky my freshman year and that was my literary salvation," Stockdale said.

According to ProLiteracy Worldwide, American businesses spend more than \$60 billion each year on employee training. Much of that training goes toward remedial reading, writing, and mathematics.

Lowell Mick White, an English professor at Texas A&M, said that while away from the lecture hall, he dedicates his time to teaching at a Federal Women's Prison Camp in Bryan.

"You get someone who comes out of prison and they can't communicate effectively, and there is a better chance they will be going back to prison," White said. "By helping people develop an ability to communicate you are going to improve their lives. Writing helps people think."

White's program to help increase literacy at the local prison is funded through a grant provided by the national endowment for the arts. White said his classes at the prison present a different assortment of students than his classes at Texas A&M.

"I've had a twenty year old in this current class and I've had women in their seventies. I've had people with Masters degrees. I've had one medical doctor. You have people also who barely have a GED," White said.

"A lot of these women have never had a chance to talk about their experience, to talk about their lives," he said. "It is a good opportunity for them to sort of discover themselves and get into a different relationship with the world around them through words and through language."

International Literacy Day is an attempt to combat illiteracy through celebration. The 2011 theme for Literacy Day are literacy and peace, with special consideration to gender equality.

UNESCO appoints an international jury to award three literacy prizes of \$20,000 each. The International Reading Association Literacy Award, two King Sejong Prizes and two Confucius Prizes are also awarded to programs from nations that are instrumental in promoting literacy.

This year, the winning literacy programs come from Burundi, Mexico, the United States of America, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, with honorable mentions to programs in Pakistan and the Philippines.

In addition, the U.S.-based "Room to Read," program is one of the two 2011 winners of the Confucius Prize for its creation of reading materials in different minority languages.

Government officials, keynote speakers and organization heads attend International Literacy Day celebrations in order to encourage the spread of literacy and award the prizes.

Beyond raising literacy, White talks about the power of language and its importance to people across the world.

"[Language] is a source of power for anybody. This is true in the prison and it's true at Texas A&M and it's true at any college, words give people power. Words change lives. Once people have it, it can never be taken away from them," White said.