

# An Orange Line Train to Ballston

by Ann Friedman

**B**allston is a stop on the Metro in Arlington. It used to be the end of the line, but no more. The Metro network now snakes into Fairfax County to its new terminus at the exotically named Vienna station. More than twenty thousand mostly anonymous people come and go through the Ballston station every day. The calming recorded voice soothes the passengers as the train moves from stop to stop: “This is an Orange Line train to Ballston.”

“An Orange Line Train to Ballston”<sup>1</sup> is also a short story by Edward P. Jones, and therein lies my tale. The main character in the story is a lonely single mother who rides the train with her children every day. On one of these trips, her children are fascinated by a man with dreadlocks, or “snake hair,” as the children familiarly call out. The man appears several mornings, always engaging the children, but then disappears, leaving only a memory of the dreadlocks—and the mother’s loneliness.

Alice and I have been reading this short story for several months. We meet in the public library near Ballston to tackle reading. It is a contact sport. We each read a section; I help when the reading gets too hard. If too many words are unfamiliar and need to be sounded out, we begin to lose touch with the story. It just becomes a reading exercise, and that is not good. Alice wants to immerse herself in the people’s lives, not sound out words. After one particularly frustrating session, Alice stopped and looked up at me: “You have read all your life.” The impact these words



*Libraries are ideal environments for literacy instruction.*

had on me was immediate. I take my ability to read for granted. I never think of the privileges it has afforded me all my life.

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Alice is an adult, a single parent, and a beginning reader; her whole life is hard work. In two years of tutoring we have progressed, but very slowly. Alice is now a more confident reader, but not a fluent one. She is still not able to keep a job that requires basic literacy skills that can be consistently applied in

the pressure of a customer service environment. And customer service, of course, is where the jobs are. Why is progress so hard? Life gets in the way: children with needs and homework that is hard to decipher, low-paying jobs that come and go, disruptive relationships, poverty—and the list goes on. Until her reading skills get to the fifth- or sixth-grade level and she can combine them with basic math skills and computer literacy, poor-paying jobs with not enough hours to meet expenses are all she can expect. In this world of eco-

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conomic realities, there is very little to feed Alice's spirit, and very little time for stories.

Alice's dilemma is emblematic of a very real Virginia crisis: more than two million adults are not ready for GED programs, or in many cases for classroom settings. These Virginia adults struggle with basic or below basic literacy skills:

Unless solutions can be found to help these adults raise their literacy levels, a majority of them will spend their lives mired in economic uncertainty, with a disproportionate number living below the poverty level, incarcerated, or unable to access vital health care and community services.<sup>2</sup>

Many of these individuals are recent immigrants who may not be literate in their native languages. Given the demographics, particularly in northern Virginia, the implications for society are frightening:

Illiterate adults are often the product of an intergenerational cycle of illiteracy, and unless they seek help in an adult education or literacy program, they will pass their poor literacy skills down to their children.<sup>3</sup>

Whatever the solution, this low literacy challenge needs to be comprehensively addressed. At best, wrap-around services would exist to assist individuals with the multiple issues of poverty in a coordinated way; but if that is not possible, good community-based education programs that meet student needs when and where they can access them should be provided. The quality of life for many adults, the future of their children, the strength and resilience of our communities, and the viability of the economy are at stake:

A 1997 study by University's Weldon Center surveyed 564 Virginia employers about

entry-level positions and requirements for individuals without a four-year college degree. The study found that "in today's job market, people who cannot read and do basic math are hired only into the least-desirable jobs—those with low pay and no hope of promotion. Moreover, the required level of literacy is increasing in almost every job."<sup>4</sup>

Most would agree that the situation has not improved in the ten years since the study.

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Public libraries have always responded to crises in the community with a can-do attitude. Libraries continue to be part of the solution to the literacy crisis. Just as public transportation networks such as the Metro must be strong for a healthy community, so too must the literacy support network. What twelve things can public libraries do to strengthen the network and contribute to the solution?

1. Strengthen the public library's role in the local community literacy network. Persons with low literacy skills can easily appear faceless to the library community. However, most public library mission statements speak of serving all residents, not just those who read. The public library voice

supporting literacy councils, literacy efforts in faith-based communities, citizenship initiatives, and adult education must be heard loud, clear, and often in the community and in government circles.

2. Advocate with other organizations in the network for additional funding for adult education. Virginia spends \$2.6 million annually on literacy initiatives—mostly in oversight and assessment. Only \$200–250 thousand is spent on direct aid to student services. Literacy organizations must raise most of their funding from local governments and from private and corporate donations and grants. The amount of state funding and the imbalance between spending on oversight and direct aid to student services must be corrected. The leadership for such changes will not come from the government. Advocacy groups, particularly coalitions, must make the case and demand change from the government.
3. Train all professional and paraprofessional staff to help low-literacy and limited English customers find needed information. These groups will continue to require help in finding accurate information. Their skills can remain tentative for a long period of time during which families grow, government services are needed, medical information for aging parents would help, and other life issues demand accurate information not easily accessible for them.
4. Place literacy materials (for tutors, students, and library browsers) in every library collection. The collections do not need to be large. Even ten to twenty-five titles can make a difference. However, the items do need to be available

and cared for. The collection needs good placement in the library and good signage. And the library staff needs to know about the collection—and why it is important. (A basic collection list is available from the author of this article.)

5. Reconsider library policies, if necessary, on the use of meeting rooms for classes and the use of public space for tutoring. Many libraries do not allow their meeting rooms to be used for classes and discourage the conversations that take place during tutoring from occurring in public space. If raising the literacy level in our communities is a priority, exceptions and accommodations should be considered. The woman who insists on total silence so she can read her newspaper may have to find another space so tutoring can happen.
6. Support and strengthen family story hour programs—including bilingual offerings, if at all possible. For many parents with low literacy skills, there is little understanding of the vital role of a parent as the child's first teacher and educator. The family story hour is often the first step to understanding, as well as the first step out of the family illiteracy quagmire. Wanting to help your children is a powerful motivator.
7. Start a conversation club. These clubs, usually run by volunteers, allow people whose English is emerging to come together in a safe environment to practice speaking in English. One leader gives students lists of slang, idioms, and other odd words. Talking about phrases such as "break a leg" or "go fly a kite" provides interesting conversation and enables immigrant learners to be more "with it" in their American speech. (For more information

on volunteer-based conversation clubs, email Jane Larsen, [jtlhal@aol.com](mailto:jtlhal@aol.com).)

8. Integrate literacy instruction into computer lab classes. Computer literacy is as essential as reading skills in today's workplace. However, teaching low literacy adults how to use a computer requires patience and a basic understanding of the learning challenges these students face. Consider partnering with a literacy or other provider with skills in this area to offer classes or individual tutoring.

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9. Start a book club with Adult Education for their ESOL classes. Often the Friends of the Library will be glad to welcome new readers and will purchase at least one book for each student to keep and own, often a first for the student. One or two discussion sessions and a tour of the library may be all that is needed to make the students library users for life.
10. Set aside one or two computers and dedicate them to language learning. Literacy students frequently find it hard to compete with the rough and tumble of the public computer sign-up process. Software for learning languages, such as Rosetta Stone ([www.rosstattstone.com](http://www.rosstattstone.com)) and *Oxford Picture Dictionary* (interactive on CD-ROM), as well as programs for learning to read,

such as IBM's Reading Companion ([www.readingcompanion.org](http://www.readingcompanion.org)), offered by IBM as a philanthropic grant, can stimulate interest and offer much-needed repetitive practice. An umbrella organization such as the Library of Virginia might consider seeking a Reading Companion license from IBM for all public libraries in the state.<sup>5</sup>

11. Recruit volunteers for literacy organizations. There is no better place than the public library to recruit volunteer tutors and classroom assistants. Making literacy a priority among public library customers will make a difference.
12. Be vigilant about the reading level of critical public documents, particularly local and state documents. The *Virginia Driver's Manual* (<http://www.dmv.state.va.us/webdoc/pdf/manual/manual.pdf>), another gateway to participating productively in the workforce, is substantially written at the twelfth-grade reading level, when the sixth-grade level should be the target. When this was called to the DMV's attention, they admitted that they did not consider the reading level when producing the manual. To their credit, they have undertaken a major rewrite. Call the government to task when the reading level is too advanced for many of the people who must use and understand the information.

The "why" of this discussion should not be lost. Alice needs to learn to read better to be able to access and interpret information for day-to-day life issues and get a better job. She also wants to grow as a person. She loved *The Women of Brewster Place* and identified with the lonely mother who longed for adult human touch in "An Orange Line Train to Ballston." The experience of human consecutiveness

and its absence in the story made Alice feel less alienated and alone. Libraries are about information and stories and connections to the larger community. As public librarians, we must work with our network partners to see that everyone has the tools to make the connections.

Libraries have always felt a connection to literacy efforts, but somehow our voice in support of universal basic literacy has become muted in Virginia in recent years. We have pursued connections and networks perceived to be more glamorous and financially rewarding. Not all these efforts have been sustainable or even rewarding. Strong public support for basic literacy and immigrant learners will never make libraries rich, but it will

make us a significant contributing partner in the solution of a major crisis in Virginia. Being a partner

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in finding and implementing solutions for community problems is where libraries have always done their best work.

**Notes:**

1. Edward P. Jones, "An Orange

Line Train to Ballston," in *Gumbo: A Celebration of African American Writing*, ed. Marita Golden and E. Lynn Harris (New York: Harlem Moon), 485–98.

2. Victoire G. Sanborn and Hilary D. Major, "Virginia's Not So Hidden Secret: The Adult Literacy Crisis," *Virginia Issues and Answers* 14, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 15, <http://www.via.vt.edu/> (accessed October 8, 2008).

3. Ibid, 15.

4. Ibid, 18.

5. The Reading Companion provided through a philanthropic grant from IBM is used in the basic literacy programs of the Literacy Council of Northern Virginia ([info@lcnv.org](mailto:info@lcnv.org)). The program is also available in the Language Lab at the Arlington Central Library. 