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PEOPLE

‘BEHIND MY EYES’

Anthology features poems contributed by adult literacy students

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Advocate staff photo by TRAVIS SPRADLING/

At her Nov. 13 adult literacy class at the Adult Literacy Advocates offices, Josephine Selders, left, studies a paragraph to find grammatical errors. As a child, Selders often missed school to work on her father's farm. Also working on the class assignment is her fellow student Mattie Smart, of Baker.

This summer, Josephine Selders, 73, finally decided to get some of the schooling she missed out on growing up as a farmer's daughter.

Selders and her 11 brothers and sisters would often be pulled out of school to help with planting and harvesting on the land their father worked in St. Landry Parish, she said.

"I had to start school, stop school," Selders said. "Then, I couldn't catch up with the other children."

These days, Selders goes twice a week to a three-hour adult literacy class provided by Adult Literacy Advocates of Greater Baton Rouge, a nonprofit organization located on North 11th Street.

"I saw an older lady who had graduated from college," Selders said, describing how what she saw on TV inspired her to begin the literacy classes. "If she can do that, I can improve my writing and reading."

Along with being better able to help the children in a church-based Head Start program, where she's a foster grandparent, Selders can claim another accomplishment.

She's one of 24 adult literacy students who have contributed to a first-time anthology, titled "Behind My Eyes," produced by the Greater Baton Rouge Literacy Coalition, a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting adult literacy.

Selders' poetry selection reads:

"Josephine

Busy, Grateful, Jolly, Happy

Daughter of Lena and Curley

Friend of Mary, John and Arthur

Who feels grateful to be here
Who likes nice neighbors and friends.
Who needs school, church, aerobics
Who lives in Baton Rouge, Louisiana
Selders.

“I feel I have a happy life,” Selders said of her poem, on a recent Thursday morning before her literacy class.

The “Behind My Eyes” anthology will be released to the public during the Coalition’s first Literacy Week Celebration, to be held Saturday through Dec. 7.

The week will include readings by some of the contributors to the anthology; donations to the Coalition by the two local Barnes & Noble stores, as well as several restaurants, based on customers’ purchases; and a presentation on dyslexia, a learning disability that makes reading difficult.

“What we’re hoping to do is help the community realize that literacy affects the whole community,” said Debbie O’Connor, executive director of the Greater Baton Rouge Literacy Coalition, of the weeklong celebration.

“We wanted to come up with a series of events to highlight literacy and how important it is and also highlight the adult students,” she said.

The week ends with a breakfast for Coalition supporters and community leaders, presenting a video produced by Cox Communications, featuring local leaders speaking about the impact of literacy on people’s lives, according to a Coalition news release.

“Literacy plays a big role in our family, our workplaces, even our

economy,” O’Connor said.

“The more the community hears from our students, the more likely other students will come forward and get the help that they need,” she said.

LaVasha Douglas, 21, is another contributor to the “Behind My Eyes” anthology.

A single mother who left high school to work, Douglas wants to earn her general equivalency diploma (GED), so that she can go to nursing school.

Last year, Douglas began attending an adult literacy program offered by the Zion City Revitalization Project, an organization made up of three Zion City churches, Greater Beech Grove Baptist Church, Jordan United Methodist Church and New Beginning Baptist Church.

“I always liked school. I always wanted to learn,” Douglas said.

She’s thrilled that her 4-year-old son, Genard Anderson, “loves to read.”

Douglas’ aunt, Elouise Barrow, who raised her, steered her toward the adult education courses, Douglas said.

In her essay published in the anthology, Douglas gives credit to Barrow and other family members for their support.

She goes on to say, in the essay, that “Another part of my motivation came from within me ... I believe I can show my son and other young people, maybe even older ones as well, that you can do better no matter what you are going through.

“If we sit down and realize that the world is changing, it’s up to us to make it right and make a change for the better,” Douglas wrote.

Douglas said it took her about three days to write the essay, working on it in her literacy classes and at home.

Her advice for other adult literacy students?

“To me, to get a career path going, you have to know exactly what you want to do,” Douglas said.

“Before I came to adult literacy school, I knew I wanted to go to nursing school,” she said.

She credits Mary Carney, a case manager with the Zion City Revitalization Project, for helping her with her literacy goals, even driving her to class sometimes.

“I mentor them,” Carney said of the adult literacy students in the Zion City program.

“A lot of them have been through a lot, but they want to move forward,” Carney said of the students, who have been meeting at the Delmont Community Center and New Beginning Baptist Church.

A new location for the classes is in the planning stages, O’Connor said.

Launched in 2006, the Greater Baton Rouge Literacy Coalition, with offices at 564 Laurel St., is responsible for implementing a community-wide literacy plan, drawn up by organizations and individuals in 2005.

The need for adult literacy programs is great, O'Connor said.

"We have learned that 28 percent of our residents function at the lowest level of literacy," O'Connor said, in a news release provided by the Coalition.

The principal adult literacy service providers of the Coalition are the Adult Literacy Advocates, Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Baton Rouge, Literacy Works, and the LSU Independent and Distance Learning Program.

Other principal providers include the St. Paul Adult Learning Center, YWCA Center for Family Empowerment, and the East Baton Rouge Parish Adult and Continuing Education Department.

Other organizations also work with the Coalition in providing adult literacy services, such as the Zion City Revitalization Project.

In a 2007 report, the Greater Baton Rouge Literacy Coalition says, "Barriers to literacy, often dismissed by the community at large as an individual's burden, must be viewed as a challenge for our entire community to overcome together."

For more information about the work the Greater Baton Rouge Literacy Coalition does, call (225) 381-7141 or visit its Web site, at <http://www.gbrliteracy.org>.