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Foreword from ALTA Chairman



However beautiful the strategy, you should occasionally look at results". These words, stated by Sir Winston Churchill, so aptly describe ALTA's strategic approach to its work. ALTA is constantly putting its work under a microscope, looking at results and re-inventing itself accordingly – whether it's responding to the varying needs of its students and to the queries of its tutors; developing new approaches to its annual teacher training courses; revising work books; or finding the funds to have phonic cards pre-printed as opposed to tutors having to laboriously make them by hand.

One of the ways in which ALTA has chosen to celebrate its 20th anniversary is to undertake an impact survey to find out what has happened in the lives of its students since leaving ALTA. How have they progressed? Are they still studying? Have they been able to access jobs? In this publication we shall share those results with you.

Seven years ago when I was invited to serve as ALTA's chairman, I readily accepted, being an avid lover of reading. I had no idea what I had let myself in for. Two years later, when I myself became a student tutor and participated in the intensive teacher training course, what I had thought would be easy turned out to be a most complex and daunting undertaking. Both learning to read and learning how to teach others to read are not as simple as they may appear, but the effort is well worth it.

In ALTA classes, teaching students to read and write is only one part of the equation, as our students often let us into their hearts, minds and dreams as we guide them through a maze of interlocking components. There are no words to describe the joy one feels when one's students smile with pride as they are at last able to write their names, or write their children's teachers a short note, or comprehend a page of writing. There is also the satisfaction of knowing that one's work is making a worthy contribution to the achievement of at least two of the United Nations Millennium Goals – achieving universal education and eradicating extreme poverty.

On the occasion of ALTA's 20th anniversary, I salute Paula Lucie-Smith, ALTA founder/CEO, who for all these years has bravely turned the spotlight on the critical issue of adult literacy in Trinidad and Tobago. Paula continues to be a guiding light, full of energy and enthusiasm and constantly innovating, unafraid to try new approaches and seek novel opportunities. Her sterling work has been recognised locally, regionally and internationally as evidenced by her receipt of the 2012 Anthony N Sabga Caribbean Excellence Award for Public and Civic Contributions, along with several national awards, including the Hummingbird Medal Gold in the year 2001 awards. As founder/CEO, Paula has developed and manages a national adult literacy programme, has written and published over 60 work books at four literacy levels and continues to visit classes and train tutors.

ALTA's success is also due to the generous contribution of the army of volunteer tutors that Paula and her team have trained over the years. They teach, assist with training new tutors and help review and revise workbooks. Over the years ALTA has trained 2,001 tutors. This year 316 volunteer tutors are teaching over 2000 students via 70 classes at 54 venues throughout the country. Forty-five class coordinators ensure oversight, quality control and documentation.

I pay homage also to my fellow board members for their inspired leadership as together we bring skills in management, administration, finance and accounting, law, communications and policy development to bear on the continued development and work of ALTA.

Not to be forgotten are the unseen staff at ALTA's three offices who have chosen to work for an NGO despite modest pay levels. They share their own special abilities with ALTA, keeping its wheels turning smoothly, oiled with warmth, energy and dedication.

Finally and most importantly, I salute all those brave students who find the courage, strength and time to rise to the challenge and join ALTA's classes in order to learn how to read and write in their adult lives. They are our reason for being.

I invite you, the public, to enjoy and be inspired by our commemorative magazine on this our 20th anniversary.

Hetty Sarjeant
Chairman ALTA



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ALTA

Adult Literacy Tutors Association

The Adult Literacy Tutors Association, a registered charity in existence since 1992, provides the only comprehensive, structured, adult literacy programme in Trinidad and Tobago.

Mission Statement

- Provide free and effective adult literacy classes for persons 16 years and over.
- Develop and publish local adult literacy materials.
- Create and maintain a bank of trained and experienced professional literacy tutors.
- Maintain resource libraries of materials and teaching aids for ALTA tutors.
- Through sponsored programmes, support literacy efforts within NGOs, the workplace, government initiatives and specific communities.

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PHOTO: GEROME BAYLIS

ALTA's Administrative Team

Front from left: Giselle Baylis - Accountant, Teheli Sealey - Office Manager

Back-row from left: Joanne Phillip - Programme Manager, Cheryl Thurab Prince - Project Manager, Paula Lucie-Smith - CEO, Isha O'Brien - Data Entry Clerk, Sally Cassim - Receptionist, M'aisha Thomas - Resource Development Officer, Mariella Garcia - Communications Officer

Editors' Note

Putting together ALTA's 20th anniversary magazine brought many surprising moments despite our years of writing and publishing more than 60 books.

Good surprises included splendid contributions from professional writers – Lennox Grant, Cedriann Martin, Ira Mathur and BC Pires. In addition we discovered many photographs taken over the years by ALTA tutors Carlyle Singh and Patricia Gulston, who year after year give many hours of their time and expertise to create a visual record of ALTA's work. Their photos, featured in this magazine, will bring you face to face with our students and tutors.

We had anticipated a flood of writing from our tutors but 'twas only a trickle and the spate came from our students. Many of our students' articles were inspired by the National Geographic film 'The First Grader', which tells of Kenyan Mau Mau freedom fighter Maruge, who, at 84 years old, insists on attending the newly-free primary school to learn to read. This was a writing exercise for students and brought us some insightful pieces. Through their words you will come to know them as individuals rather than abstract statistics.

Our editorial team has divided the magazine into four sections: About ALTA, ALTA Students, ALTA Tutors, and ALTA in. This last section looks at the spread of the ALTA Programme beyond the free community classes. Sections are separated by wry, real-life based cartoons which we tweaked just a little.

We commissioned an impact survey for the magazine and you'll find the results in the second section. Paula, our founder, ended up writing more articles than she expected, but she is the one who knows ALTA better than anyone.

We're sure you'll be interested in the stories from ALTA's prison programme, including quite moving ones from inmates; those on our NALIS Youth Lit programme, ALTA's movers and shapers, and an inside look into ALTA's progression in our ALTA timeline. The timeline was beautifully illustrated free of charge by Abovegroup Ogilvy.

We believe you'll find many engaging articles whatever your interest in literacy. Whether you skim or read in-depth, you'll be able to add your own assessment of what ALTA is to those from our tutors and students featured next to the number on each page. Finally, we challenge you to distinguish the ALTA students from ALTA tutors and staff on our cover.



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Contents

- 2 Mission Statement
- 3 Editors' Note
- 7 Greetings

Section 1: About ALTA

- 9 Against The Odds
- 14 Meet Paula
- 16 Heroic Veterans of a Volunteer Brigade
- 18 20 Years of ALTA – Timeline
- 22 Putting ALTA on the Map
- 24 Profiles of Five ALTA Venues
- 27 Movers and Shapers
- 31 Fundraising 101

Section 2: ALTA Students

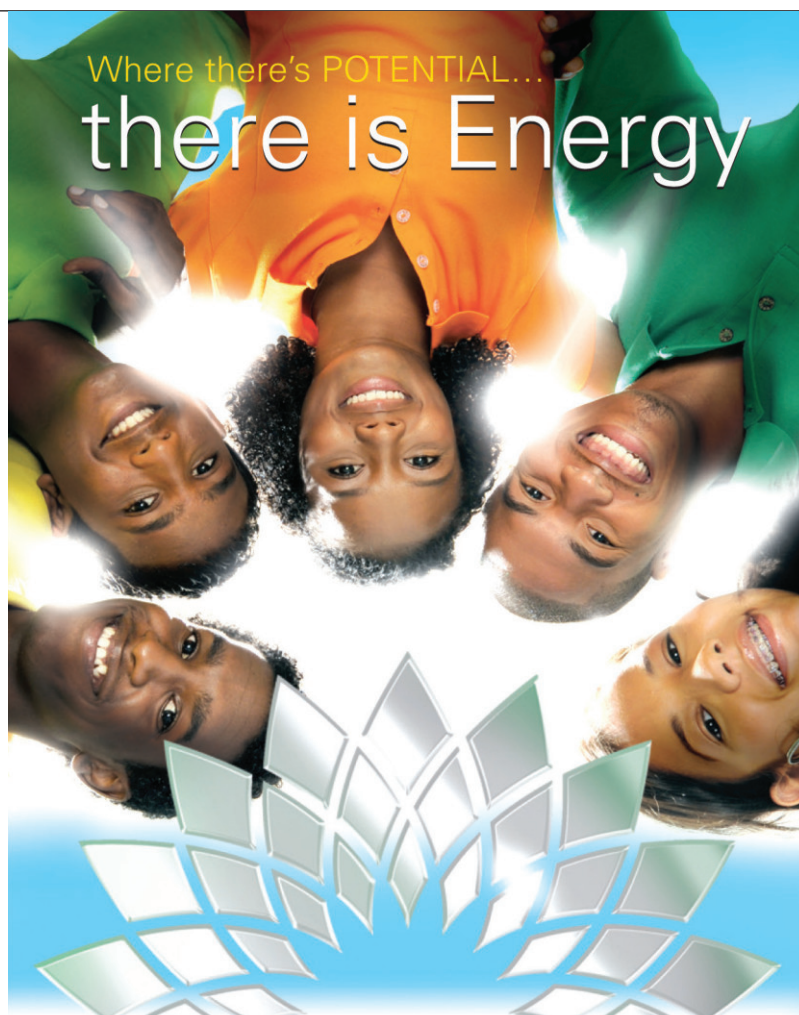
- 35 Who are Adult Learners?
A perspective
- 36 Student Writing
- 43 Student Portraits
- 47 The First Grader
- 51 ALTA Student Faces the Cameras
- 52 ALTA Impact Survey 2001-2011
- 54 Reading Circle, Life Circle

Section 3: ALTA Tutors

- 59 Tutor Roundtable
- 62 Tutor Profiles
- 67 Tutor Writing
- 78 The Men of ALTA
- 81 ALTA Tutor Faces the Camera
- 82 Bois
- 83 So You Think You Know Phonics?

Section 4: ALTA in...

- 85 ALTA in Prisons
- 86 Writing from Prison
- 88 ALTA in the Workplace
- 91 ALTA in Schools
- 92 ALTA in Libraries
- 94 ALTA in Mayaro
- 97 ALTA in the Caribbean
- 98 ALTA in the Spotlight
- 100 How Can You Help ALTA?



Their eagerness to learn energizes us

The energy and vibrancy of our nation's youth is inspiring, and harnessing their potential is bpTT's focus.

That's why we support their aspirations by providing bursaries and scholarships in the fields of Engineering, Social Sciences and Geosciences at the University of the West Indies. We're also nurturing talent through grants to the University of Trinidad and Tobago.

Our partnership with the Adult Literacy Tutors Association (ALTA) and our Brighter Prospects Programme in Mayaro, help ensure that potential for higher learning is never wasted.

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Congratulations ALTA on your 20th Anniversary



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Greetings

Ms. Benita Somerfield

*Executive Director - Barbara Bush
Foundation for Family Literacy (ret.)
Governing Board Member, UNESCO
Institute for Lifelong Learning*

As the Executive Director of the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy, I was asked by the (then) White House to support the work of Laura Bush in her role as UNESCO's Honorary Ambassador to the United Nations Literacy Decade – a decade devoted to improving the literacy levels and lives of adults and children around the world. One of the principal strategies implemented to further this goal, was to convene literacy practitioners, region by region, to present and share "best practices" among peers.

It was in this context that I became aware of the excellent and in many ways unique work being done by ALTA. Paula Lucie-Smith participated in a panel that I chaired and after listening to her speak and then reading descriptions of ALTA's instructional methodology and outcomes, I became convinced that this is truly one of the most effective programs in the adult literacy field. The combination of research-based, accountable instruction that recognises the special ed needs of so many adult literacy students, combined with a culturally-relevant life skills focus, is not something that I had encountered before, and frankly still haven't. I was also very impressed by the on-going training and monitoring provided for tutors. That is a critical piece in the formula for success!

Sadly, quality education in the adult literacy field is rare. Scarce resources tend to be allocated elsewhere, despite the fact that without a literate workforce, a country's economy will suffer. And research clearly shows that the literacy levels of parents (particularly mothers) are the key components in school success for children. The good news for Trinidad and Tobago is that ALTA provides quality education in its programs!

I applaud ALTA's contribution to the communities and countries it serves, and send my congratulations on your 20th anniversary!

Ms. Karen L. McDonald

*High Commissioner for Canada to the
Republic of Trinidad and Tobago*



I am honoured and privileged to be asked to contribute to ALTA's 20th anniversary magazine. Indeed, it provides me with an opportunity to publicly acknowledge and congratulate ALTA on its many achievements over the past two decades.

The High Commission of Canada, through its Canada Fund for Local Initiatives, has supported ALTA and its literacy programs on a number of occasions by funding tutor workbooks, teaching manuals, student handbooks and other related materials and equipment. As early as 1995, the Canada Fund recognized the importance of the work being done by ALTA, Ms. Paula Lucie-Smith and her team, and we have continued to support ALTA programming with contributions totalling almost \$70,000 Canadian dollars (TT\$420,000).

We have been impressed with the sustained growth of ALTA over the years of our partnership as it has expanded from a small organization based in Port of Spain to a national association conducting free adult literacy classes at 60 locations by 250 volunteers to over 1,500 students annually. Truly impressive figures!

Your outreach has improved the lives of thousands of people in Trinidad and Tobago: reaching male and female inmates through the Prisons Programme; teens and pre-teens at the NALIS Youth Lit project currently at 11 libraries throughout Trinidad and employed adults through the Adult Workplace Programme, to name just a few of many programmes ALTA has developed and delivered.

As a donor, the High Commission of Canada must also take this opportunity to congratulate ALTA on the transparency, accountability and sustainability of its programming. Not many non-governmental organisations can boast of being 20 years old. Your longevity is a solid indication of your ability to produce results, to bring about positive change, and to 'walk the talk' of your vision "to achieve improvement in adult literacy in Trinidad & Tobago, as well as in the Caribbean, through the development of a programme relevant to the needs of adult learners in the 21st century."

Once again, I want to congratulate Ms. Paula Lucie-Smith and the rest of the team at ALTA on all of your achievements and the richly deserved recognition you have received, including the Humming Bird Medal (gold) in 2001 for national service in the sphere of education, and most recently, the Anthony N Sabga Caribbean Award for Excellence.

I wish ALTA continued success in all of its future endeavours.



Ms. Karen L. McDonald

Section 1: About ALTA

At Diego Martin ALTA class



FACTS & STATS

- **Two national literacy surveys, ALTA 1994, UWI 1995**
 - 23% struggle with everyday reading and writing (ALTA Level 1 and Beg)
 - 32% can cope with some everyday reading and writing, but not all (ALTA Level 2)
 - 45% can read and write well enough to handle a wide cross section of everyday tasks, including reading the newspapers and medicine labels.
- **2006 PIRLS Progress In International Reading Literacy Survey**
 - 9-10 year olds.
 - T&T ranked 39th out of 45 countries with a score of 436, below the international mean of 500.
- **LAMP Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme**
 - Promoted by UNESCO to improve the quality of statistics.
 - Five literacy levels; face-to-face assessment customised to the culture of each country.
 - Dec. 2011, POS: CARICOM workshop on developing a common framework for a literacy survey. Conducting LAMP is left to individual Caribbean countries.
 - In 2011, St Lucia completed LAMP and Jamaica committed to start.
- **CONFINTEA VI Sixth International Conference on Adult Education, Brazil 2009:**
 - Views adult literacy 'in a new light as the essential basis upon which to empower people, expand their capacities, and ultimately, to build human resources development.'
 - Emphasized 'literacy as a key competence for lifelong learning'. Without effective literacy programmes, expansion of adult education increases inequality as the literate become more educated, leaving the non-literate further behind.
 - Culturally appropriate adult literacy programmes that have been proven effective should be a compulsory component of skills training programmes targeting disadvantaged groups.

Against The Odds

by Paula Lucie-Smith



PHOTO: KIBWE BRATHWAITE

*Paula Lucie-Smith gives a talk at
ALTA's annual tutor meeting*

The odds are firmly against learning to read as an adult. The pages of this magazine reveal the many factors that prevent adults from becoming literate in their childhood – and show clearly that these seldom go away as the years pass. Indeed rather than diminishing, the obstacles to literacy are often compounded by age, the responsibilities of adulthood and experience of school failure.

To beat the odds and create readers and writers of those who have left their school days long behind, an adult literacy programme must tackle the hurdles to literacy one by one.

Hurdle 1: Fear that I cannot learn to read and write

The oft-quoted Caribbean literacy rates of over 90% are in fact the rate of enrolment in primary school, the assumption being that access to primary education equals literacy. It is safe to say then that most Caribbean adult non-readers have attended primary school and already given literacy a try, maybe even what they consider their best shot. Past failure makes us

all hesitant to try again, and when that experience comes with judgements that you are stupid and “cyar learn”, the biggest hurdle is to believe that you can learn to read and write. Students have said to me, “Plenty people try with me already you know.” and “My head real hard.” This first hurdle stops many from even starting.

The first task of an adult literacy programme is to give the student success, since telling them “You can do it” will not erase decades of being told the opposite. They have to feel the success for themselves.

The key is to assess the student and start them where they know enough so they feel they can cope. In an ideal world, each student could have an individual education plan, but the only practical option is to create levels, which of necessity will encompass students with a range of skills – from those nearer the lower level to those who almost made it into the level above.

ALTA has four levels: Beginner and Levels 1, 2 and 3. While

Against The Odds

there is more to distinguish the levels, this is a rough guide: Beginners do not even recognise all the letters of the alphabet; Level 1s do not recognise many common words nor link all letters to their individual sounds; Level 2s read, but slowly, missing out or guessing words in everyday text, hindering comprehension; Level 3s recognise most words but want to improve comprehension and writing skills, often with a view to passing CXC subjects.

The second critical factor is one-on-one support, so the student is never left struggling. Once the task overwhelms, brain freeze looms. Brain freeze reinforces "I can't", so timely intervention is a must.

ALTA provides individual support in two ways – first through an 8:1 student-tutor ratio to allow the tutor to work directly with individuals or pairs of students. The ALTA tutor spends 80% or more of class time moving around the room to give help where needed, vigilant to avert brain freeze and offering help to those who would not venture to ask for it.

How help is offered is just as important as the offer of help. Help does not mean doing the task for the student or providing the answer. That does not engender an "I can" feeling – it in fact reinforces the "I can't". The ALTA approach is to use questions to guide the student to discover what is to be learnt or to apply previous learning. The tutor's questions provide clues to move thinking in the right direction and towards the answer. The question also picks up on how the student is thinking – it "responds to the response" (Dr Tim Conway). The good teacher is master of the art of questioning, a far more demanding skill than telling, as the teacher must know the answer themselves and also understand how they arrived at that knowing. The questions should give just enough to stimulate thought. This trains the thinking process to arrive at "I can".

In ALTA, we evaluate students' progress not by how much of a task they cannot do, but by how much help they needed to complete the task. The small student-tutor ratio makes it possible to get everyone

to complete the tasks, but only when they can do these fairly independently are they ready for the next level. ALTA has no tests, therefore no one fails. ALTA students do not need more scar tissue.

The tutor is one arm of support; just as important is support from other students. ALTA fosters a cooperative rather than competitive classroom, with respect for all being enshrined as the number one rule of the ALTA classroom. Students work in pairs to fill out their workbook and to practise reading, taking turns to read a paragraph, with tutors walking around to help when neither knows. Card games and walk-around activities bring groups together as does class discussion and trips. A literacy objective is worked into each of these group activities, e.g. we discuss the words in the lesson to promote word recognition and comprehension.

Creating the right learning environment is essential, but will only lead to literacy if your teaching approach develops the skills of reading and writing. This brings us to the second hurdle.

Hurdle 2: Aptitude in areas other than literacy

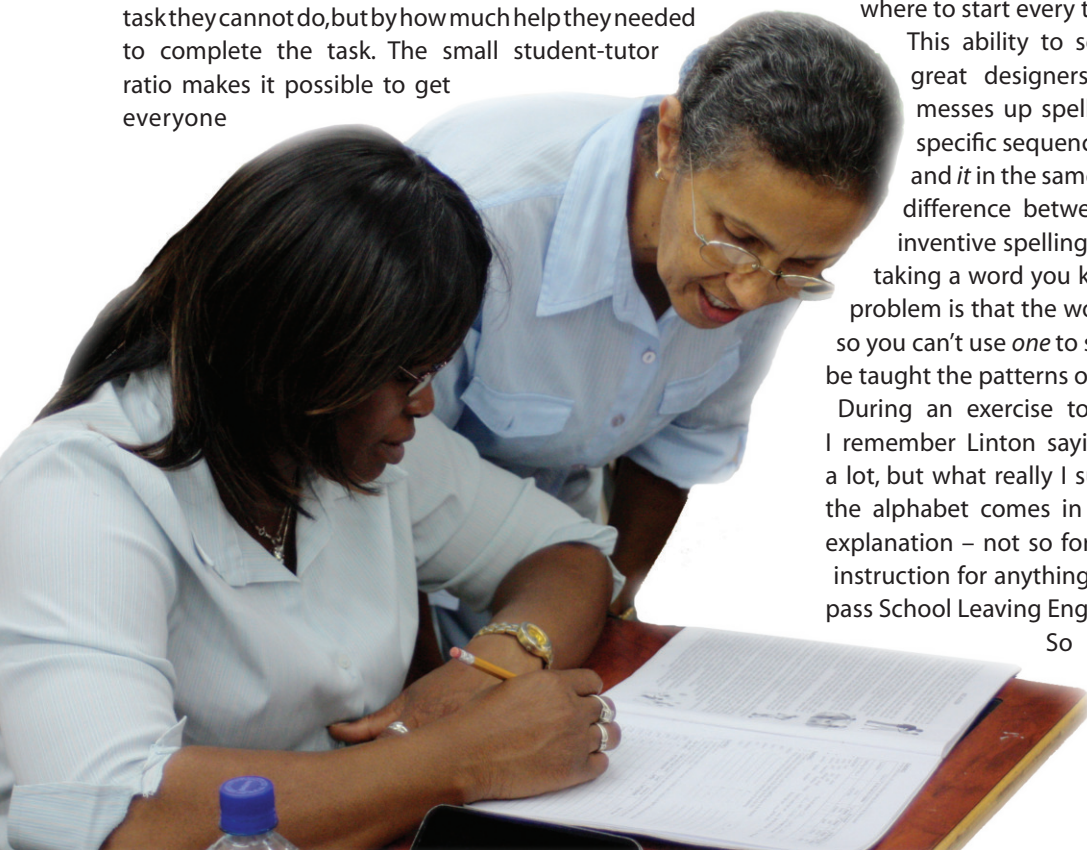
The greatest myth about literacy is that it is easy – perhaps because we see children reading and writing. Reading and writing are skills and, as for all skills, the wiring of our brain determines our level of ease. The dyslexic brain has an "organizing disability which impairs hand skills, short-term memory and perception, so inhibiting the development of reading, writing and spelling, and sometimes numeracy." (Dr. H. Chasty, Director Dyslexia Institute UK)

The challenges the dyslexic faces were brought home to me as I sat reading with David, one of my first students. He read the first line and glanced at me, no doubt saw a confused expression, and blithely said, "Oh, you want it the other way." He began this time to read left to right. Imagine having to work out where to start every time you face print.

This ability to see things from both sides produces great designers, architects and techies, but really messes up spelling, which requires letters to be in a specific sequence. The dyslexic can write *the* and *teh*, *ti* and *it* in the same piece of writing and not perceive any difference between them. They produce wonderfully inventive spelling, like *onet*, which uses a good strategy, taking a word you know to spell one you don't know. The problem is that the word *one* is irregular with a final silent *e*, so you can't use *one* to spell *want*. The dyslexic brain needs to be taught the patterns of spelling.

During an exercise to put words into alphabetical order, I remember Linton saying to me, "Paula, I know we do this a lot, but what really I supposed to be doing?" To most of us, the alphabet comes in a fixed sequence which needs little explanation – not so for the dyslexic. Linton needed detailed instruction for anything in sequence. With this, he went on to pass School Leaving English with distinction.

So if you found reading, writing and spelling difficult as a child, these will



not be any easier to grasp with age – unless a different method is used.

Eureka for me was attending the Dyslexia Association Training in Methods for Teaching Dyslexics in July 1992. Not only was it tremendously useful for my teaching, but for my own understanding of the why and how of written language. Phonics was never part of my education, so it was fascinating to discover the 44 sounds used in English and the many ways these are represented by letters and letter combinations; to understand my own spelling errors and begin exploring how to remedy these. The course went beyond the phonic code to the structure of words. We have all heard readers tell non-readers to break unrecognised words into syllables. Here finally was a system of steps and rules to do this. Here was analysis. Here was a multi-sensory system using cards for built-in review and games for practice. Best of all, the word recognition skills came with a teaching sequence.

The methodology was supported by decades of research and practice in teaching dyslexics in the US and UK-based on the work of Dr Samuel Orton, Gillingham and Bessie Stillman. In the 1920s and 30s Dr Orton identified difficulty in automatically connecting letters to their sounds as the primary weakness of struggling readers and advocated the use of all sensory pathways to reinforce weak memory.

Missing from the programmes I had looked at previously was this structured and explicit teaching of word recognition. Missing too was a way to engage the thinking skills of adult learners. Here I learnt the directed discovery approach mentioned earlier. Developed to take advantage of the average-plus IQs of dyslexics, this was a perfect match for adult learners.

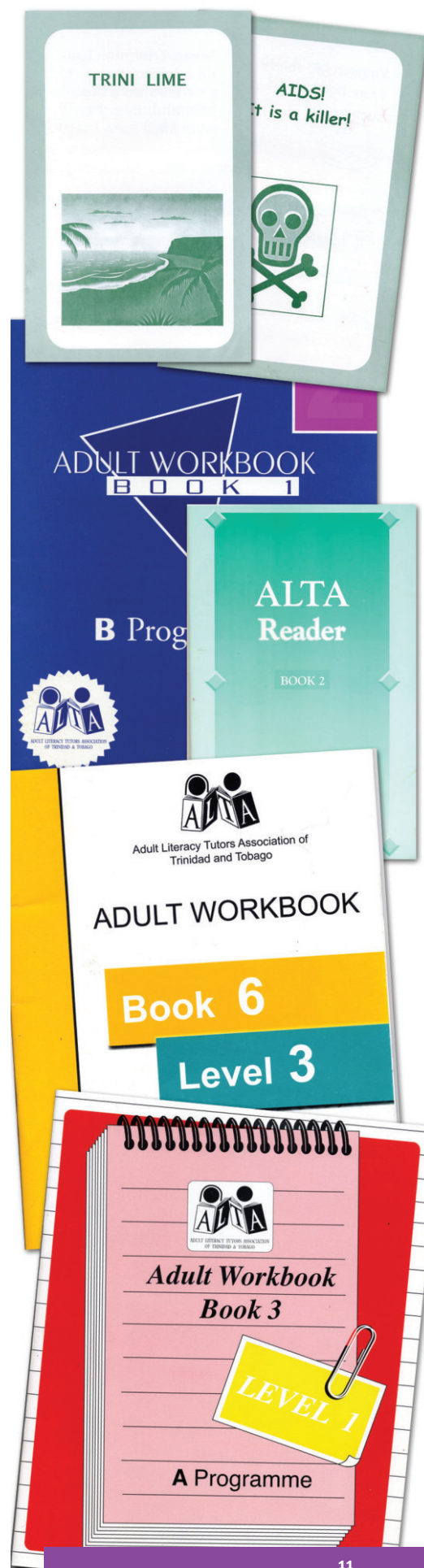
Why use the methods for teaching dyslexics? Though seldom diagnosed, up to half of an ALTA class may be dyslexic, as opposed to the estimated 10% of the entire population. Also, non-dyslexics, like me, benefit equally from analysing the written code. This is clear in international trends in reading instruction. Over the last two decades I have seen the explicit teaching of phonics, now dubbed synthetic phonics, begin to make its way into mainstream education, a trend that is picking up real speed. This is different from the implicit phonics of the West Indian Reader which grouped words according to their phonics but depended on the learner to work out the connections between letters and sounds.

The dyslexia programme however was designed for individual remedial teaching, but I had a class of 10 to 20 students. I divided the programme into levels and began to build lessons around the skills. From local literacy expert, Wallis Wyke, I got a framework for grouping reading skills into four components – word recognition, vocabulary development, comprehension, and study skills. Like the dyslexia programme, ALTA lessons must be taught in sequence to progressively build each skill. ALTA added more games and created six board games using folklore, local maps and Carnival.

But decoding is not the only route to reading. There is a visual route, and fluent reading relies on building a bank of sight words which we recognise instantly. We store whole words, almost like pictures, in the brain's visual memory – much like when we see a face and a name pops into our head. The reader's brain learns to take a snapshot of new words to constantly expand the words instantly recognised. The non-reader's brain, especially those not wired for reading, has to be taught to do this.

My first exposure to this was the Literacy Volunteers of America (LVA) tutor training video, donated by the US Embassy in 1993. In the LVA approach to teaching sight words, the tutor selects high frequency words one-by-one from a reading text, writes each on a small card and teaches these using a series of steps. The cards provide easy review until the words become instant. With some modification, I still use his approach with ALTA Beginners and Level 1s.

From LVA too I learned the Language Experience Approach (LEA), where the tutor writes the words the student says and then uses the written text as reading and teaching material. This proved an ideal early tool for ALTA Beginners, whose minimal word recognition skills make it difficult to find text that they are able to read. While students are



Against The Odds

not really reading, just remembering what they have said, they begin to match spoken to written text and, just as importantly, they get that critical early success. Also, it's cheap!

However, LEA stories can be time-consuming to create, especially for six or more students, and students may not remember their exact words after that class, thus limiting future use. Another tool was needed for beginner readers and this I picked up in Atlanta in 1997 at the only International Reading Association (IRA) conference I have been able to attend. One of the presentations discussed predictable books for children, like *The Little Red Hen*, where the stories follow a pattern. The reader can predict the repeated words on every page and use the pictures to guess the words that don't follow the pattern. Reading an entire book gives the student a feeling of accomplishment. I thought, "Why not make predictable books for adults?" With help from an IRA grant, I published 18 predictable books, which form most of the reading for the Beginner level and the context for teaching high-frequency sight words.

The IRA conference confirmed for me that the field of literacy instruction was just as fraught with conflicting theories a decade after I'd completed my course in the teaching of reading in my Post Graduate Certificate of Education at Leicester University. The challenge is not a lack of materials and approaches, but the multiplicity of these – albeit with much overlap and often just different packaging and terminology. A collection of strategies and tools without coherence does not lead to reading, especially for the dyslexic.

I think my particular talent is seeing through the fluff to the core strategies that work, applying and adapting these to match the needs of the adults I teach and weaving them into a comprehensive programme of literacy instruction – creating order, structure and sequence.

Hurdle 3: Spoken word and written word

Low aptitude for literacy often goes hand in hand with low aptitude for language. In the Caribbean, difficulty acquiring language is compounded because we have two forms of English – Standard and Creole. The difference everyone notices is in pronunciation. This only occasionally leads to problems, as in the newspaper story that mentioned square pegs in 'wrong' holes.

In implementing my dyslexia training in the ALTA classroom, I realised that phonics had to change to match my students' speech rather than the other way around. For adults to forge a meaningful link between letters and sounds, the sounds have to be those they use. ALTA students choose between Creole and Standard English pronunciation for the 'th' phonics card and, because Trinis say the words peer, pear, pare, pair exactly the same, at ALTA these four, three-letter endings have the same sound.

The difference in grammar is much harder to address. Most of our ancestors arrived in the Caribbean, many unwillingly, and were faced with extreme language immersion with no instruction. They picked up the vocabulary, but ignored features not essential for communication and continued to apply the only grammar they knew – that of their native language. The shared vocabulary makes it easier to communicate, but has the big drawback of making it very difficult to distinguish Creole from Standard. The common perception that Creole English has no past tense shows this clearly. The form of the verb which Creole uses to show the past is that used in Standard English to denote present tense, e.g. "They play mas" is past in Creole, present in Standard. For present, Creole would say, "They does play mas."

ALTA has a well-established language policy shaped heavily by lectures given at ALTA tutor meetings in the early 1990s by Dr Lawrence Carrington and Merle Hodge. ALTA recognises that Creole English has a different grammar to Standard English and accepts the language students come with. We replace the terms 'good English' and 'bad English', or correct and incorrect English, with Standard English and Creole English. When students begin to write for themselves, according to their goals and needs, ALTA teaches the differences between Creole and Standard English, one by one in a structured way.

Hurdle 4: Time, energy and worries

The best programme and teacher can't help you if you are not present, in body and mind. The students who learn to read and write are those who have the will to make the time and effort, an ingredient of success in any endeavour. However the choice is particularly difficult for many literacy students. The jobs available to the non-literate often mean they must work long hours, over which they have no control. Time spent at class is time when they could be earning a few dollars. Only

when you can think beyond the next meal can you think about education, so for the really poor the dollar has to come first. The grip of poverty does not often loosen over time. This, added to the responsibilities of adulthood, can stretch out attendance at ALTA over a decade.

So while ALTA follows the academic calendar with a start in September and an end in July,



once you have enrolled at ALTA, you will not be turned away. Some students leave to pick fruit in Canada for six months or work in catering, so miss from Christmas to Carnival, but we welcome them back, maybe advising that they go for extra practice at an ALTA Reading Circle.

Adult learners have many demands on their time, so time spent in a literacy class must be relevant, must impact on their everyday lives, must empower them. This is where Brazilian educational theorist Paulo Freire steps into ALTA. In his ground-breaking 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed', he proposes replacing the banking approach to education, where the teacher is a narrator and the student a listening object, with problem-posing education: "The educator constantly re-forms his reflections in the reflections of the students, [who] are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher" – education as the practice of freedom rather than the practice of domination. This kind of literacy instruction transforms the student from object to subject in his world.

Freire's thinking was embraced by the rapidly-growing informal education sector, which had the openness to innovation absent in formal schooling. Freire is godfather to the learner-centred approach of adult literacy with its emphasis on engaging student interest and using material relevant to the student's life. The aim is to equip students not only to function independently in their society, but to transform their worlds. Literacy combined with critical thinking skills has the power to transform lives.

Reading Freire gave a theoretical base to what I was doing in the classroom. Freire's emphasis on respect and nurturing of the spirit is obvious in an adult class, while maybe it is not as evident in a room of children or teens – though, respect there is just as important. At age 30, when I first stood before a class of adults, most of them were older than I was. They outstripped me in their wealth of life experience and their ability to endure and transcend grave mistreatment. As I got to know my students, I was amazed that they could smile, laugh, be thankful and kind to others when the world had been far from kind to them.

Because literacy is a skill, you can choose any content as the vehicle to teach reading and writing. ALTA has chosen life skills as the content for instruction – students learn to read and they learn to manage their lives and even transform these. One POS student in her middle years, when faced with an ultimatum from the children's father that she leave ALTA class or leave him, chose to leave him. She told the tutor that he was keeping her down, and ALTA was taking her up.

The ALTA Programme uses material adults would come across in daily living in T&T, but simplified to their reading level. It engages students in topics ranging from relationships and handling anger to budgeting and health, with some fun lessons on jokes and excerpts from Samuel Selvon. We draw on students' experience and start them thinking about this, e.g. is beating a child the best way to mould behaviour?

ALTA was a life-skills programme long before the current



Ramona Khan

buzz about life skills in adult education. Unfortunately the life-skills courses I have seen in T&T are content-laden, as are our primary and secondary curricula, and demand a level of reading and writing which most who seek alternatives to mainstream education simply do not have.

Staying the course to the finish line

When your students face a Mt Everest climb to literacy, you need to be always looking for the tools to make this easier, more fun and just different from what they've tried before, so they'll keep climbing.

A decade and half after I did my dyslexia training, the Dyslexia Association was host to the LiPS course presented by neuropsychologist Dr Tim Conway of The Morris Centre in Florida. LiPS uses sensory perception to supplement weak auditory perception to forge a three-way link between what you see, what you hear and the movement you feel your mouth make. Training the brain to perceive mouth movements has proved another magic key not just for ALTA students, especially Beginners, but for tutors, for me and all who are seriously interested in deciphering the phonic code.

Over the last five years, psychologist Ramona Khan has conducted workshops for ALTA tutors in critical thinking, emotional intelligence and conflict resolution. From her I have learnt that movement stimulates the brain and the 2012 Trinidad & Tobago Reading Association Easter Workshop by Kathy Perez provided constructive ways to get students up and moving to enhance learning.

After more than 20 years working in adult literacy, I still marvel that students and teachers actually surmount the huge obstacles, so ALTA students do read, do write, do look up and out at the world where before they looked down at the ground at their feet. One of my first students, Yvonne, captured the wonder when she told me, "Paula, I was in church Sunday gone and I look up at the big, big sign at the front. I take it in syllables. I see the word 'come'. I look at the first part and I get it. Imagine all these years they telling me 'welcome' and I didn't know!"

Meet Paula

Earlier this year, columnist and creator of the popular *Trinidad Guardian* feature, **Trini to D Bone**, BC Pires sat with ALTA founder, Paula Lucie-Smith. This personal picture of the ALTA CEO emerged from their exchanges.

I grew up in Valsayn when it was coconut trees and nobody lived there because... sandflies! And they were not wrong. We were probably the first house to have air-conditioning, and the purpose of it was to close the windows before it started to get dark, and lock the sandflies out. Otherwise the entire wall would just be black with them. My father was an electrical engineer and he put this one air-conditioning unit in and maintained it for, must have been 30-40 years.

Before 1970, we used to wander around Valsayn North freely. There were only a few houses around. We had cousins in Maracas Valley and we'd go to the river next to their home and to Mayaro for holidays.

My mother instilled in me from the earliest: the worst thing in the world is a selfish person! I have four brothers. I'm the second child. I didn't grow up a tomboy though. My mother made a distinction between what girls and boys did, and girls did everything in the kitchen. But it did mean that I had my own room, with the four boys in the other room.

I have three daughters. My husband, William Lucie-Smith, and I have been married for 26 years now. William is a mix you don't usually get, people who are good with numbers and also good with words.

I was brought up a Catholic. I have an uncle who's a priest. I'm a practising Catholic, but I'm practical about religion. I'm okay in a group of Spiritual Baptists. It doesn't matter if your god is Allah. Religion gives you a structure and teaching.

I was born in 1960 and went to school in the early Independence era. And there was a fervour, a feeling that you had to build the nation. Maybe St Joseph's Convent did that for me, but there was definitely a feeling, and it was taught to you at school, that you were not living life just for yourself. It could be a combination of Catholic thinking, but you felt you are here to serve others.

It's almost a missionary thing you go through in your youth, where you want to do something good. I felt a real calling to teach.

I'm not one who likes the consumer, fast-paced life. The first time I went to New York City, I really hated it. I remember a



PHOTO: KIBWE BRATHWAITE

waiter in a restaurant – I must have been blocking him – and he just told me, "Move your chair!" Look, that is rudeness! Recently I went to New Jersey for a wedding and saw an America where you had parks and community life, the library and Main Street. I spent a day at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and loved it. The big city museums are great. I'm much more connected to England. My father is English.

Like most people, I don't remember learning to read. We didn't have the complete explosion of children's literature there is now. I remember Stephen's & Johnson's and their one lonely shelf of children's books. They used to have these girls' annuals and collections of short stories I liked. I remember reading *The Little Prince*,

a tiny little sliver of a book, with children's drawings. It was fantastic.

I studied history and I like historical fiction, like Sara Donati. She wrote a series that was a continuation of *The Last of the Mohicans*. That's the kind of thing I like: it's got some romance in there, it's got "people" stories, and it's got the shaping of a new world.

Because I love reading, I can't conceptualise what life would be without it. The closest I came to that was when I visited Greece, where they don't even have the same alphabet. A bus comes along and it has this word on the front and you ask yourself, "Okay, should I get on this bus?" Where am I going to end up? And you think, "Suppose I had to live my whole life like that, always wondering, "Am I in the right place?"

I did my teacher training in England at a time when the phase was, "Throw out the textbook! Make your own materials." Teachers exhausting themselves to stimulate children who sat there and gave you a look that said, "Okay. Try again."

When I came home, I taught forms four and five social studies at St Augustine Senior Comp. If you're not reading at that point, nobody's teaching you reading. And it was apparent there was a reading problem.

There is this ongoing misunderstanding about the teaching of English and the teaching of reading, two very distinct skill sets. People go in there and start to talk about verbs – and their students don't know that, "h-e" is "he".

There's a cycle: parents not reading well; their children not reading well. How do you break that cycle? That's where you

say, "You got to start with the parents." It's the whole chicken-and-egg problem. I decided to start with the chicken.

I'd had daughter number two and I'd left teaching. You can't take a year off. And 1990 was International Literacy Year and there was this little, maybe two-paragraph press release out of the Ministry of Education. The Ministry had joined up with UNESCO locally to form COMILYTT, the Committee for International Literacy Year Trinidad & Tobago, and they were offering a free two-week course to volunteers who would teach adult literacy. There were something like 80 people on this course! Wall-to-wall people!

I got dengue fever on the third day and missed the rest of the adult literacy course. I still got my certificate, though – which we would NEVER do in ALTA. You miss one day – you miss *half-day* of the ALTA course and you come back next year and make up your time! Otherwise, no certificate for you.

About four months after the adult literacy course, I saw this ad in the papers that said I had been teaching, with these five other teachers, an adult literacy class at Woodbrook Secondary from the week before! So I called up Emlyn, one of those listed who I'd bonded with and said, "Did you see that we're supposed to be teaching a class since last week! We'd better go this week!" So the two of us turned up there and there were people! We had to plan what to do. Emlyn said, "You're the teacher. I'm just working in a church office." I told her, "But I missed the course!" That's how I started in adult literacy.

Part of my teacher training was having to develop material, and that was very good for when I came into adult literacy. There was no material. It wasn't like you were throwing out things: there was NOTHING! We started classes before the Internet, so you couldn't "Google it". Using a lot of what I learned in Leicester University and from the Dyslexia Association training I did in 1992, I came up with a structure I could use.

You come from a secondary-school teaching background so you give adults work to do at home and you ask, next day, "Okay, what did you do at home?" And they grin and tell you, "Nothing!" And you realise the homework thing doesn't work, what you have is the two-hours-twice-a-week structure. And that continues to be the basis of ALTA.

You have to figure out what will work and what won't work. With adults, you have to use materials relevant to their lives. In the early days at Woodbrook Sec, we'd go across the road to Hi-Lo and read product labels!

I don't EVER use the term you just used. Because, in Trinidad, that term encompasses much more than an inability to read or write. It's a term of abuse. I say "non-readers" or "poor readers" or "struggling readers". And I say, "literate". But not the other one. We have to wipe out that word from the English language.

Often people's ability to rhyme can tell you how quickly they will make progress. You do rhyming and you're going round the room and you get, "cat"; "mat"; "sat"; "rat"; and then, "dog"! And you go, "Okay, this person is going to be a Beginner for some time".

...there was a fervour, a feeling that you had to build the nation. Maybe St Joseph's Convent did that for me, but there was definitely a feeling, and it was taught to you at school, that you were not living life just for yourself. It could be a combination of Catholic thinking, but you felt you are here to serve others.

You get 50- and 60-year-olds who come in just to learn to read the Bible. That's the big, big test, the Bible! John Grisham has nothing on that book, boy!

Our offices are in our own property on Belmont Circular Rd, where you get your taxi, opposite the post office. It used to be a Chinese grocery. When we moved there, I was introduced to the largest roaches I'd ever seen in my life. Workmen kept them in a bottle for me. Very nice.

I've been very fortunate that quality people have come into ALTA and we have a board of directors that has the range of expertise needed to run the organization almost like a corporation. We were very fortunate to attract [original chair] Hubert Alleyne, who started Roytec, a real visionary when it came to education. He put us on a very firm footing from day one.

I worked as a volunteer until in 2002 Hubert said, "ALTA must have a CEO that is a paid position". The founder of an NGO will work regardless. The day the founder dies is the day you find out if the NGO is sustainable. So that was Hubert's vision. The thinking has changed internationally and it is now understood that you can make a career in NGOs

It was a good thing Dr Sabga came along. What's good about the type of funding provided by the Anthony N Sabga Caribbean Awards for Excellence is that it's not tied. A lot of funders say, "You're doing a great job with 50 classes all over the country teaching 2,000 adults. So we'll give you money to teach recovering drug addicts". Like they don't have a big enough problem already, recovering. People who offer you funding often want to fund things you're not doing. The Sabga Awards funding goes towards what we are doing. Which is great!

Amazingly, coming from nuns, but St Joseph's Convent built a thinking in female students that nothing is in your way.

Heroic Veterans of a Volunteer Brigade

by Lennox Grant

Lennox Grant is a writer and editor whose weekly column appears in the *Sunday Express*.



A well-coiffed, buxom woman in a navy pantsuit tended to be first-up in answering the questions. The topic was *homophones*, and the class was being challenged to tell *sea* from *see*, and *male* from *mail* as they appeared in sentences. Neither the first-in-class student nor any of the other seven paid any attention to a visitor taking notes on a couch at the back of this Adult Literacy Tutors Association Level 2 classroom where the tutor was leading a revision exercise.

One sentence offered a choice between *birth* and *berth*. Everyone spoke up correctly for *berth*, but a young man confessed he had thought it was spelled *both*. He likely learned a fine point about spelling and pronunciation.

For the visitor, however, cool in the enjoyment of his supposed high literacy, this was a learning experience too. He was meeting, for the first time, the word *homophone*. That encounter, hardly life-changing, sparked illumination of a field of knowledge and dedicated activity about which he had long remained in the dark.

Rote learning, in the 1950s, say, of "A for apple, B for bat, C for cat," and of "Dan is the man in the van," had worked as a launching pad into a world-orbiting command of the look and sound of words, entailing comfortable facility in reading and writing. It's like a moment of epiphany, then, to realise that people, though sharing such early-schooling immersion, had declined for various reasons to be carried along with the mainstream toward full citizenship in a world of reading and writing.

"How could that be?" Lystra Hazarie asked herself. "We were all in school together." For Hazarie, an ALTA tutor from 1998, who has also worked as a co-ordinator, trainer of tutors, and developer of a spelling programme and a dictionary, the discovery that otherwise capable people had simply missed out on learning to read and write marked a starting point in her own inquiry into how some people learn and others don't.

For those who don't, the deficiency may not represent an obvious, automatic and total keep-back. As Hazarie found, they

learn other things. "They have a lot of coping skills and some necessary skills come easier than reading. They have had to commit to memory things we would pick up in a book." And they obey the commandment: "Fake it till you make it."

They claim to forget their glasses at home; they ask directions in the street or in offices. The act of faking it reaches Academy-Award performance level when people in the same household are so taken in as to make the shock discovery, only decades later, of family members unable to read and write.

Among those rallying to the cause as pioneers and leaders in the ALTA movement, no narrative of family or personal literacy distress serves to explain their recruitment. Hazarie's ALTA association came after retirement from an engineering support unit in an energy company. "Before I met them in the classroom, my society never included people, looking like you and me, who were unable to read and write," she said.

Once on board, she threw herself fully into overcoming the learning disabilities that leave some people on the periphery of lettered life. "It just keeps going. It doesn't matter the day or the time," she says of the tutoring and consulting demands to which she is driven to respond, while herself pursuing literacy studies at UWI.

The mission to which ALTA's volunteer specialists answer the call of duty is large in scale but not universally recognised. Official statistics, cited internationally in the CIA Factbook, report a Trinidad and Tobago functional literacy rate of up to 98%. ALTA's estimates, informed by what Tim Padmore calls a "hard reality on the ground," put T&T newspaper-level literacy somewhere around 50%. "I feel more and more that the situation is dire," said Padmore, an accountant by profession and an ALTA board member, who teaches the Level 3 literacy programme.

"Filling a form for official purposes presents a practical nightmare for those lacking requisite reading, writing and

Tutors attend annual meeting at ALTA Belmont

spelling skills," Padmore said. Some parents are frustratingly unable to help their children with homework. Other sources of silent grief include inability to read the Bible or meet the job-related need to write reports.

"It could be the crisis arising when "people cannot make sense of a legal document" that brings the unlettered out of the closet of faking and unknowing, and may lead to contact with an ALTA reading specialist," said Wallis Wyke, who is also a trainer of teachers. Wyke, who worked as a literacy coach in the Caymans and in T&T, devotes most of her time to the training of those who would teach literacy in schools and those who lead ALTA's Reading Circles.

Inside ALTA Reading Circles, participants could be exposed to material ranging from bank reports through novels and spy thrillers to autobiographies, with the aim of honing the skills of reading for enjoyment, for gaining useful information, and for intellectual development.

The ALTA approach doesn't stop at the students getting to know words and meanings. Passages selected or composed as training materials emphasise relevance to local topics and events. One question asked of statements in a Level 1 exercise requires students to distinguish fact from opinion: "Wendy Fitzwilliam is the most beautiful woman in the world. Fact or opinion?"

Developing a person's thinking is identified by ALTA CEO, Paula Lucie-Smith, as one pillar of the association's philosophy, but nothing is forced upon programme participants. "We accept any student that comes to us, age 16 and over, wanting to improve their reading and writing," she said. "You stay as long as you need to achieve what you want. We can't tell an adult what their goals are."

From Lucie-Smith the backstory unfolds about how education expansion from the 1970s, assuring all primary pupils a place in secondary school from 2000, actually worked against the preservation of adequate levels of literacy, and led to a multiplication of reading difficulties. From the 1970s/1980s, she recalls a pervasive view that "in junior secondary schools, the children can't read. They were laughed at and mocked. Mostly boys, their condition became visible because it went with bad behaviour."

An enormity of felt need stirred the can-do spirit of Lucie-Smith and like-minded volunteers who eventually constituted in ALTA elements of both a ministry of literacy and a tool-making support industry of materials and methods for teaching and learning. These methods and tools were heavily influenced by Cathryn Kelshall, armed with her own critical insights into dyslexia as a cause

of literacy deficits.

Kelshall had been moved by the "discrepancy children", who "know the answer, but don't ask them to read it or write it". An estimated 10% of people are dyslexic, that is, they have average or above IQ but specific difficulty acquiring reading, writing and spelling skills. However school teachers lack the know-how to reach such children with specialised instruction.

"Teachers are not taught to teach reading to children who can't catch it," said Kelshall, chairman of the Dyslexia Association. "They teach the 26 letters of the alphabet, and the children have to take it from there." After training in teaching dyslexics at the Dyslexia Institute in the UK, she sought to apply techniques applied there to defeat dyslexia's negative effects in T&T. By 1990, she had made allies. "Six of us put \$35 each in the bank," she said, also crediting help from the British High Commission. "That's how the Dyslexia Association started."

Her work today comprises teaching teachers how to deal with dyslexia, and putting students who need the attention in touch with teachers so trained. Today, Kelshall celebrates her meeting that "extraordinary woman," Paula Lucie-Smith. But she also mentions a memorable moment in a supermarket meeting with a dyslexic woman she had taught as a little girl. "I just finished my Ph.D.," she told Kelshall.



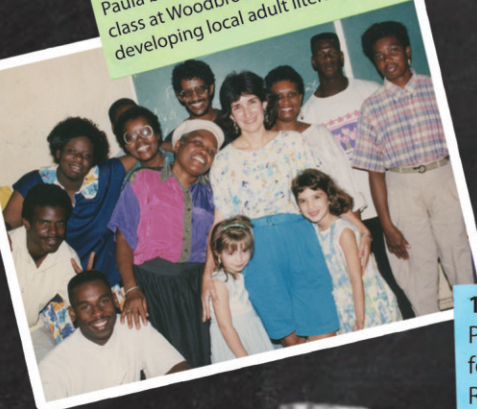
Cathryn Kelshall



ALTA tutor Rhona Harris with students at Harvard venue

1990

Paula begins teaching an adult literacy class at Woodbrook Gov't Secondary and developing local adult literacy materials.



1992

Paula & co-tutor Hilary Montgomery form ALTA at a meeting at Learning Resource Centre, Couva.

1993

ALTA conducts first tutor training course working with Reading Facilitator Wallis Wyke and Tobago-based Zena Puddy, who had worked with the Language & Literacy Unit, London.



20 Years

1997

At Caribbean Sound Basin, Paula records phonic cassette, later transferred to CD.



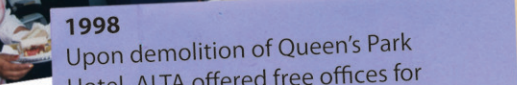
1997

Paula, Hilary Montgomery and Marie-Louise Brown Dottin complete the ALTA Workbook series, comprising 18 books for literacy Levels 1, 2 and 3.



1998

Upon demolition of Queen's Park Hotel, ALTA offered free offices for two years at Fernandes Industrial Estate.



1999

ALTA partners with CSEO volunteer Diane Driedger to produce anthology of student writing 'At Last'.



1998

Expert ALTA tutors become the first paid ALTA class coordinators & Canadian Executive Services Overseas (CESO) volunteer Kaye Grose conducts two courses for ALTA tutors in workplace literacy programmes.



1998

Prison officer Rudolph Garcia invites ALTA volunteers to start prison literacy programme at POS, which continues until 2011.



1993
ALTA's teaching resource library starts with books from around the world.



1994
ALTA gets its first office - the old barber shop at the back of the condemned Queen's Park Hotel.



1994
ALTA board has tea at President's House when Her Excellency Mrs Zelayhar Hassanali accepts the role of ALTA patron.



of ALTA

LEARN

1994
ALTA and Public Libraries form alliance. On International Literacy Day, libraries host the first national student registration for free ALTA classes.

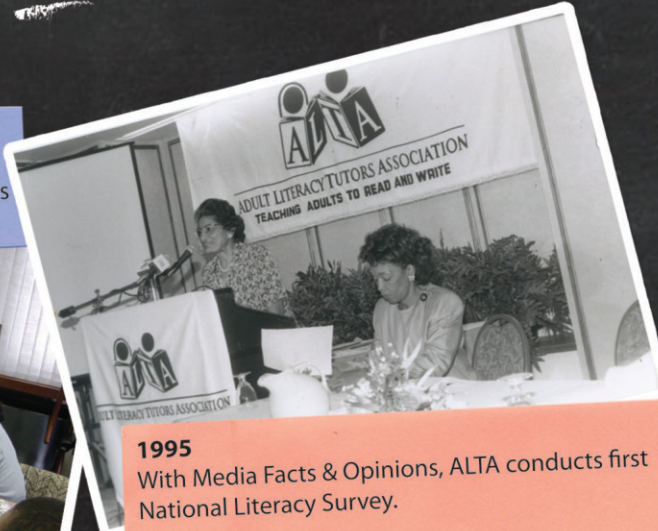


1995
ALTA granted charitable status & first ALTA adult workbook published and launched at POS Public Library.

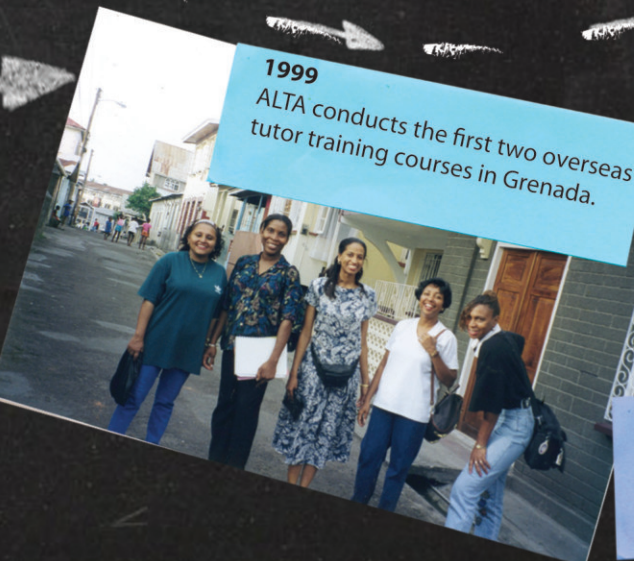
2001
ALTA receives the national award of Humming Bird Medal (gold) for service in the sphere of education.



1995
With Media Facts & Opinions, ALTA conducts first National Literacy Survey.



1999
ALTA conducts the first two overseas tutor training courses in Grenada.



2000
ALTA moves into its own building in Belmont & starts a database of tutors and students.





2001

South office opens at Vistabella Regional Complex managed by Marilyn Rampersad-Talma.

2001

At Carrera Island Prison and then at Maximum Security Prison, the ALTA tutor training team conducts the first training courses for inmate volunteers.



2002

ALTA trains 39 primary or secondary school teachers for the Belmont Youth Literacy Project sponsored by the Embassy of Japan and Amoco.

2008

ALTA selected as model for replication by UNESCO and Paula speaks at the UNESCO regional conference in Mexico.



2008

ALTA and NALIS launch Youth Lit Programme in public libraries.

2005
bpTT sponsors ALTA Programme in Mayaro communities and schools.



Pride



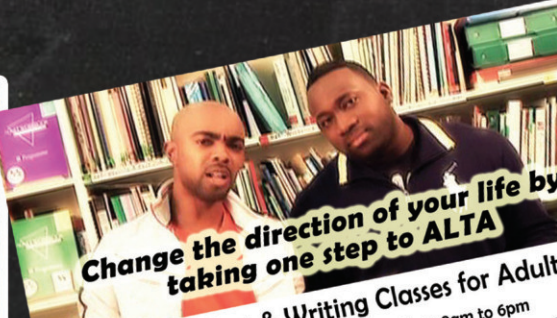
2009

Lystra Hazarie develops and pilots ALTA Spelling Programme with school children in Arima during August.



2009

Paula attends the CONFITEA VI Conference in Belem Brazil with T&T Government delegation.



Change the direction of your life by taking one step to ALTA

FREE Reading & Writing Classes for Adults
Register on Tues 7th & Wed 8th Sept, 2010 from 9am to 6pm

At these public libraries: Port of Spain, San Juan, Tunapuna, Arima, Sangre Grande, Chaguana, Couva, Point Fortin, San Fernando, Siparia, Princes Town, Mayaro

Contact The Adult Literacy Tutors Association at 624-ALTA (2582) / 664-ALTA / 65

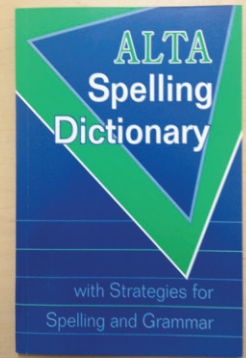


2002
ALTA launches first local educational board game 'ALTA Caribbean 6-in-1 Game Pack'.



2002
ALTA celebrates 10-year anniversary with Walk for Literacy.

2003
Publishes ALTA Spelling Dictionary.



SUCCESS



2005
Introduction of Reading Circles to build the reading habit in current ALTA students and graduates.

2003
South office relocates to current address at St. Paul's Anglican Church Hall.



2003
ALTA Arima branch opens at current location in the PTSC Terminal Mall managed by Arlene Wallace Romero.



ALTA Database



Login

User Name

Password

login

2010
ALTA new spokesmen JW & Blaze, with help from free radio and TV6 ads, take student numbers for the first time to 2000.

2011
Student and tutor database for coordinators, tutors and staff goes online.

2012
ALTA CEO and Founder Paula Lucie-Smith is the 2012 Anthony N Sabga Laureate for Public and Civic Work.



Putting ALTA on the Map



NORTH

Free Adult Literacy Classes

Sponsored by: Republic Bank Limited

- Belmont ALTA Office
- Maraval, Assumption RC Parish Centre
- POS, St. John's (London) Baptist Church

Sponsors needed:

- Barataria, St. George's College
- Cascade Servol Life Centre
- Diego Martin Gov't Sec
- East POS, Duke Street Pentecostal Church
- Laventille Open Bible
- Morvant, Russell Latapy School
- POS National Library
- POS, Tranquillity Gov't Primary
- San Juan North Secondary
- St James, Harvard Club
- St. James, St. Agnes Anglican School
- Westmoorings, International School of POS
- Woodbrook Government Secondary

Reading Circle

Sponsored by: Republic Bank Limited

- Barataria, St. George's College
- Belmont ALTA Office
- POS National Library
- St. James Library



Paula Lucie-Smith
North
Regional Coordinator

MID-EAST

Free Adult Literacy Classes

Sponsored by: National Gas Co.

Trinidad & Tobago

- Curepe, Holy Saviour AC Church
- Tunapuna Boys' RC

Sponsors needed:

- Arouca, St. Finbar's Girls' RC
- St. Augustine UWI
- Warrenville Regional Complex

Reading Circle

Sponsored by: Republic Bank Limited

- Curepe, Holy Saviour AC Church



Lillian Ramsaroop
Mid-East
Regional Coordinator



SOUTH

Free Adult Literacy Classes

Sponsored by: United Way TT

- Debe Secondary School
- Gasparillo Gov't Primary School
- Princes Town Library Conference Room
- Princes Town, St. Stephen's College
- San F'do, ALTA South Office
- San F'do, Naparima Girls High School
- San F'do, Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church Hall
- Siparia Boys' RC School

Reading Circle

Sponsored by: Republic Bank Limited

- Princes Town, St. Stephen's College
- San Fernando, Naparima Girls' High School
- Siparia Boys' RC School



Marlene Charles
South
Regional Coordinator

SOUTH WEST

Free Adult Literacy Classes

Sponsors needed:

- Cedros Anglican School
- Pt Fortin, Egypt Village Gov't Primary
- Pt Fortin, New Village Community Centre

- Pt Fortin National Library

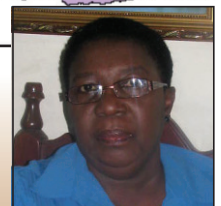
- Roussillac Community Centre

Reading Circle

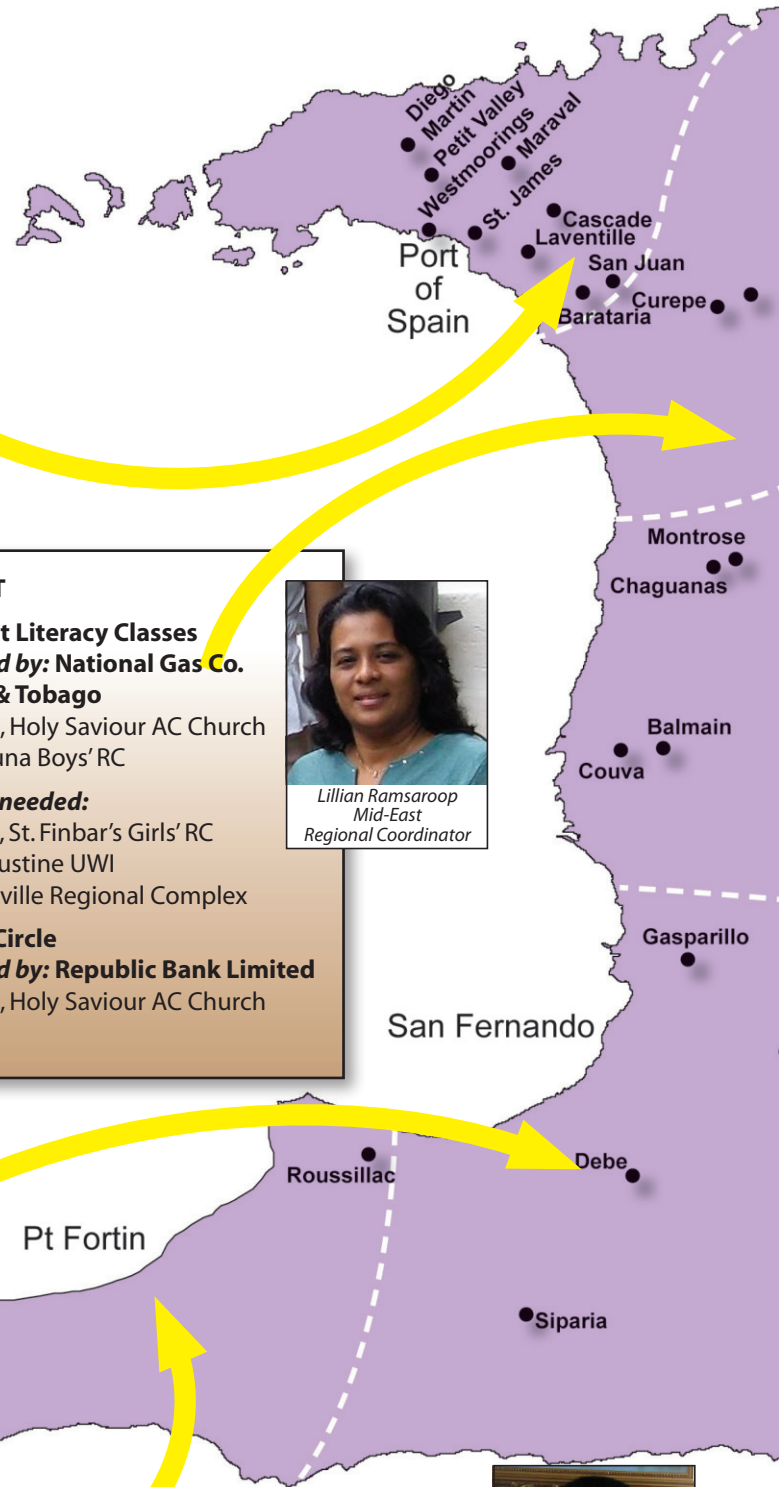
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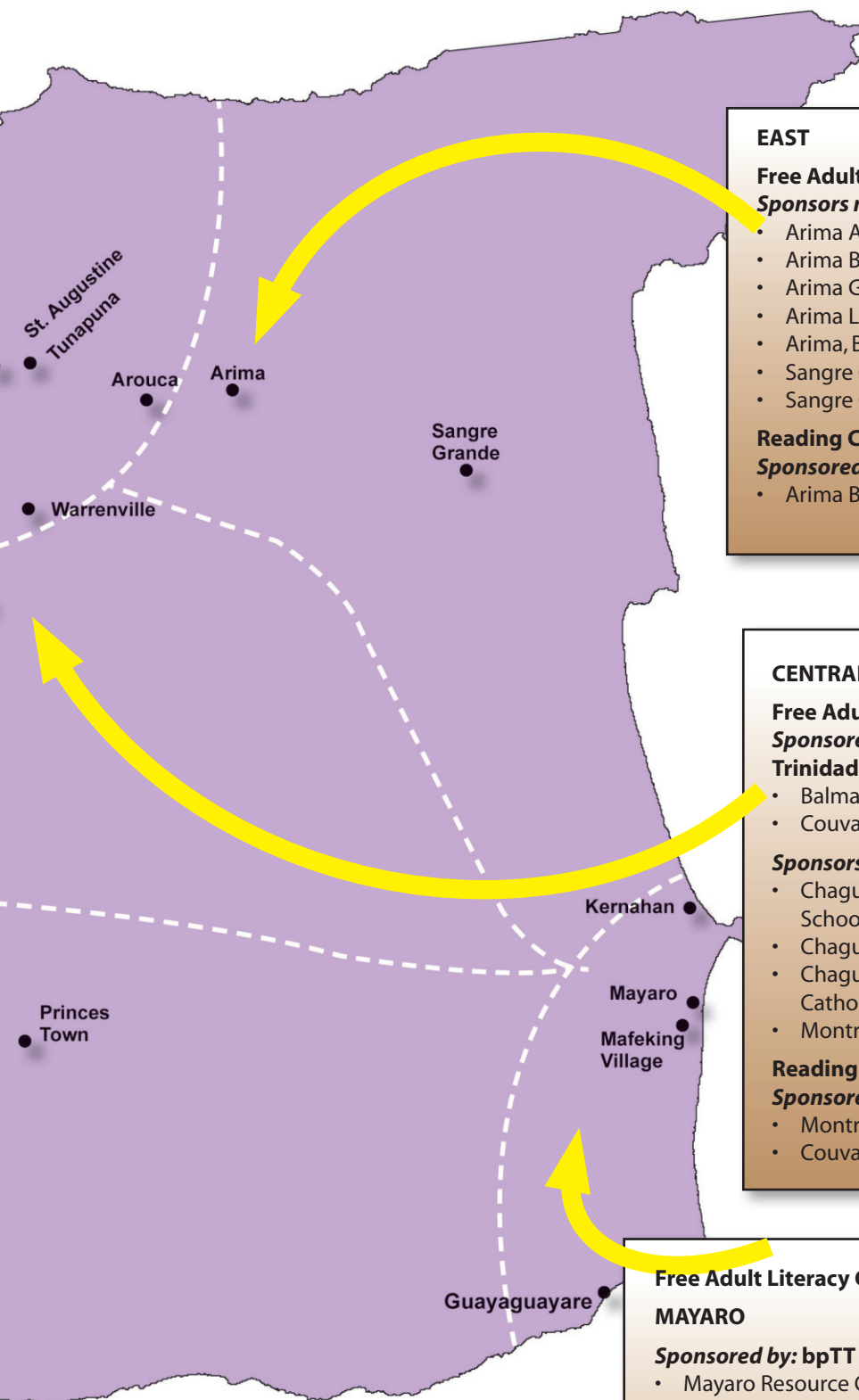
Republic Bank Limited

- Pt Fortin Anglican School



Gloria Ferdinand
South West
Regional Coordinator





EAST

Free Adult Literacy Classes

Sponsors needed:

- Arima ALTA Office
- Arima Boys' RC
- Arima Girls' RC
- Arima Library
- Arima, Bethel Pentecostal Assembly
- Sangre Grande Nazarene Church
- Sangre Grande Public Library

Reading Circle

Sponsored by: Republic Bank Limited

- Arima Boys' RC



Lystra Hazarie
East
Regional Coordinator



THE NATIONAL GAS COMPANY
OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO LIMITED

CENTRAL

Free Adult Literacy Classes

Sponsored by: National Gas Co.

Trinidad & Tobago

- Balmain Community Centre
- Couva South Government Primary

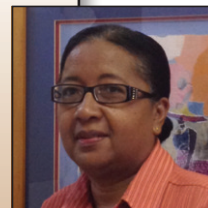
Sponsors needed:

- Chaguanas North Secondary School
- Chaguanas Public Library
- Chaguanas, St. Philip and St. James Catholic Church Parish Hall
- Montrose Gov't Primary

Reading Circle

Sponsored by: Republic Bank Limited

- Montrose Gov't Primary
- Couva South Government Primary



Cheryl Thurab-Prince
Central
Regional Coordinator



Trinidad and Tobago

Free Adult Literacy Classes

MAYARO

Sponsored by: bpTT

- Mayaro Resource Centre
- Guayaguayare High School
- Kernahan Resource Centre
- Mafeking Gov't Primary

Reading Circle

Sponsored by: bpTT

- Mayaro Resource Centre



Agatha Williams
Mayaro
Regional Coordinator



Profiles of Five ALTA Venues

by Shiv Sawh, student at the Ken Gordon School of Journalism
& Communication Studies, COSTAATT

Woodbrook Government Secondary School, located at French Street in Port of Spain, is considered to be the birthplace of the Adult Literacy Tutors Association of Trinidad and Tobago (ALTA). In 1990, as part of International Literacy Year, the school hosted a volunteer adult literacy programme, established by the government of Trinidad and Tobago in conjunction with UNESCO. Paula Lucie-Smith was one of over 500 tutors trained nationally. The programme ended abruptly in December 1990, but Paula's students kept coming so she continued classes at Woodbrook Secondary and began seeking co-tutors. For a year she was joined by UK teacher Jenny Scott, wife of author Lawrence Scott, followed by Hilary Montgomery.

As students were coming from all over Trinidad, travelling long distances to attend the Woodbrook adult literacy classes, Paula and Hilary together founded ALTA to create a network of adult literacy tutors.

Woodbrook Government Secondary School was the first venue to come on board with ALTA, expanding from just one classroom to two, then three rooms as student numbers grew. She recounts those early days at Woodbrook Secondary when she would have to momentarily stop her lessons because of the sound of violins coming from the evening music classes being held next to the ALTA classes.

Even though classes were shifted from place to place and principals and staff changed, ALTA was always generously granted the use of classrooms at the Woodbrook Secondary School. Twenty years on and the school remains dedicated to accommodating Levels 1 to 3 of ALTA's classes. Over the years Woodbrook Government Secondary has attracted tutors of high quality, so it also has the honour of producing more coordinators than any other ALTA venue.

St John's London Baptist Church is located at 8 Pembroke Street, Port of Spain, in the vicinity of some of the most notable landmarks in the city such as the Hall of Justice and Woodford Square. The cornerstone of the church was laid in 1853 and the church opened for worship in March of 1854. ALTA was first granted the use of an area in the church's manse building in September 2005 by Reverend Anslem Warrick.

Even when the church was being renovated and the entire main structure completely gutted, ALTA was allowed to share the area used for services. "Your learning environment plays an important role in your learning," says Paula Lucie-Smith as she praises St John's Baptist Church on always providing a comfortable location for classes. The surroundings are ideal – spacious, clean and air-conditioned, rare comforts for an ALTA class. For the tutors, a big plus is that they can house supplies in a storage container in the room, reducing their load to and from class.

ALTA has strategically selected this venue given its accessible location as a hub for all persons assessed as Beginner Level students in Port of Spain and environs. Classes are on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 5pm -7pm. In 2011-12, 30 students enrolled, taught by five volunteer tutors. Over the last two years, the men for the first time have greatly outnumbered the ladies.

Merle Carrington, a devoted member of St John's Baptist

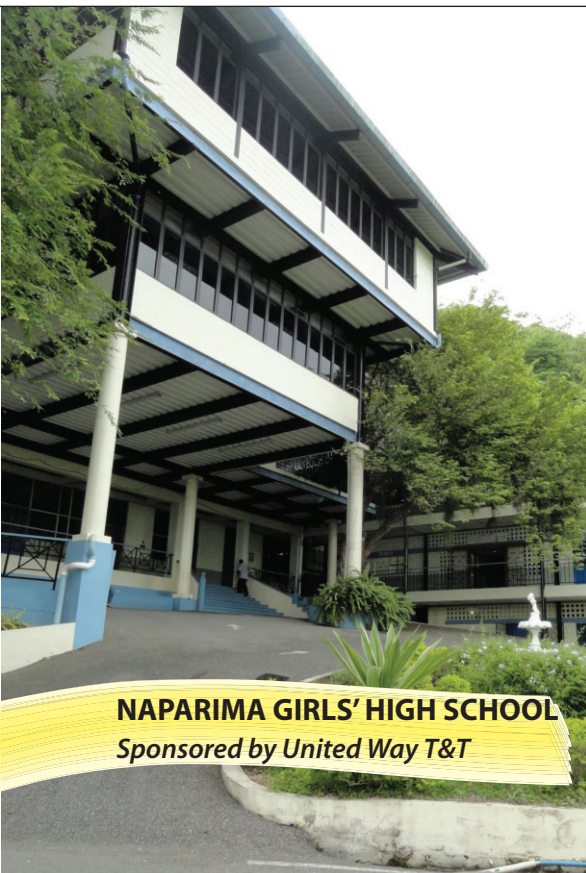


PHOTO: GEROME BAYLIS

ST JOHN'S (LONDON) BAPTIST CHURCH

Sponsored by Republic Bank, Power to Make a Difference

Church, is also a trained ALTA tutor. She currently works with a special group of Beginner Level students whose mental or physical challenges have inhibited their ability to learn. Merle confirms that the church views its association with ALTA as a great way to fulfil its social outreach mandate. She takes gratification in seeing her Beginner students' successes, such as recognising the alphabet and being able to write their own names. These achievements indicate that the unity between St John's Baptist Church, POS, and ALTA is poised to last for many fulfilling years.



NAPARIMA GIRLS' HIGH SCHOOL

Sponsored by United Way T&T

Naparima Girls High School (NGHS) located at 4 La Pique Road, San Fernando, has many accolades to its credit. The school celebrated its centenary in 2012. Lauded as one of the best academic institutions in the country, its motto is "*Non nobis solum sed omnibus*" which is Latin for "*Not for ourselves only but for all*".

In keeping with that sense of community building, the school has been a remarkable supporter of ALTA, and has offered itself as a dedicated venue for ALTA classes for over 16 years, adding an ALTA Reading Circle in 2006 and accommodating the South refresher training for continuing tutors for more than a decade. Free, accessible venues are particularly difficult to find in San Fernando, so being able to rely on NGHS has been doubly valued and brought needed stability to ALTA South. Also NGHS is unique in being the sole venue where a tutor was a past ALTA student.

At the start of the 2011-12 academic year, it had one of the largest enrolments with about 300 ALTA students registered. This is a testament to the large student catchment area NGHS serves, being so strategically located in South Trinidad. ALTA classes run on four afternoons from Monday to Thursday and there are currently 20 hardworking volunteer tutors teaching all four levels of ALTA's programme.

One of those dedicated tutors at NGHS is Jane Amman, who has been teaching ALTA beginners there for over nine years. Jane recalls going with her church, of which her husband is the pastor, to rural areas in south Trinidad to assist persons with reading and writing difficulties. When she found out about ALTA she immediately signed on as a volunteer.

It is this commitment to adult literacy from the Naparima Girls High School and from volunteer tutors like Jane Amman, which ensures that ALTA can continue in South Trinidad for many years.



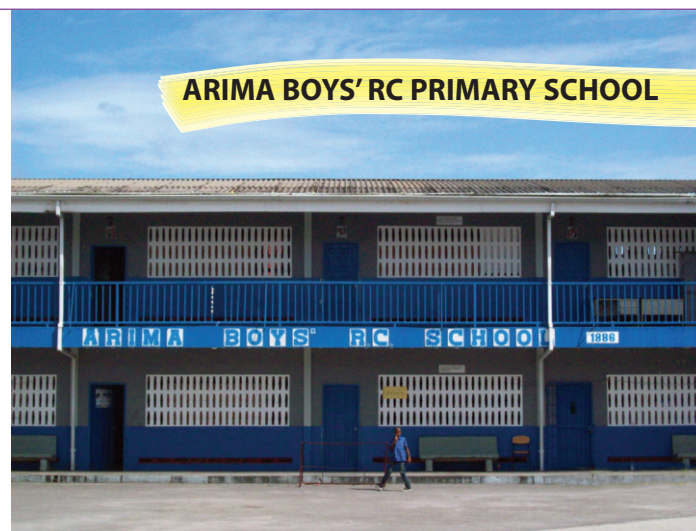
ST. GEORGE'S COLLEGE

St. George's College, founded in 1953, is located at Sixth Avenue, Barataria. It is one of the most sought after secondary schools in the East, listed as a first choice by many SEA students. St. George's has had a very strong and vibrant connection with ALTA ever since former principal Hyacinth Bonair-Agard first granted the use of several classrooms for evening classes in September 1996.

It is definitely one of ALTA's most popular venues given the fact that all classes have been fully enrolled for consecutive years with many prospective students on the waiting list. This high rate of enrolment is partly due to the large catchment area that surrounds the venue. Students come from all along the East-West Corridor, as well as from San Juan/Barataria, Laventille, Beetham and Morvant, to attend these classes. Another factor is definitely St. George's well maintained premises, pleasant ambience and spacious classrooms.

One of the endearing stories in ALTA's history is that of Nera Narine, who became an ALTA tutor while serving her tenure as principal of St. George's College. Ms Narine was inspired to join ALTA because of her dedication to education. She continued as a tutor for over ten years, continuing when she retired from the teaching service in 2004. "People think that you are stupid if you can't read; that is not true. Everyone has the ability to learn and any challenge can be overcome," Ms Narine says, remembering her past ALTA students.

The former principal's faithful service to adult literacy in turn inspired her niece Nera Narine to become an ALTA tutor. Their contributions are typical of the effort of the many tutors who add value to their community at the St. George's College classes.



ARIMA BOYS' RC PRIMARY SCHOOL

Arima Boys' Roman Catholic Primary School, located at the corner of Woodford and Sanchez Streets, celebrated its 125th anniversary in 2011. Within those 125 years of service to its community and country the school has produced achievements in academics, music and especially sport. ALTA began a fruitful relationship with Arima Boys' RC when former Principal Gabriel Cumbermack agreed to ALTA evening classes in September 1999.

As interest in ALTA increased, Arima Boys' RC provided more rooms and more days to match ALTA needs and it now houses three levels and a Reading Circle. 120 students started the 2011-12 academic year, taught by 22 tutors, either 5:30 - 7:30pm on Mondays and Wednesdays or 5 - 7pm on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

ALTA's Regional Coordinator, Lystra Hazarie, has noticed the improvement in the lives of the many adults who have entered ALTA's programme there and succeeded. "Each student is like a book, with so many stories lost in the pages between the covers, but when they learn to read and write, they begin to tell their own story and unlock their possibilities," Lystra explained. She noted that at Arima Boys' RC there has been an increase in the number of male students coming to classes, and they have become more interactive and interested in their literacy advancement.

Arima Boys' RC continues to be one of the greatest supporters of ALTA's efforts, positively impacting individual lives, the community and the nation.



Movers and Shapers

by Paula Lucie-Smith

Hubert Alleyne, Chairman 1997-2004

In the mid-1990s, when ALTA was little more than a vision, Hubert Alleyne, Executive Director HR of Royal Bank, founder of Roytec and the Young Leaders Programme, came to the one-room ALTA office at the back of the soon-to-be-demolished Queen's Park Hotel (QPH) to meet with me. While most of T&T accepted the mythical 95% literacy, Hubert recognised literacy to be a key developmental issue. In our formative years, ALTA benefited from his talent for building a culture for success within an organisation. Hubert was always available to ALTA, full of innovative ideas while remaining rock steady. He exuded calm, able to immediately bring focus and order to any environment, which made him a negotiator par excellence.



Hubert Alleyne chairing the AGM in our new Belmont office

Sharmine Nottingham, ALTA Board, Fundraising Officer 1995-1999

Brought by a tutor friend to the ALTA office, there and then Sharmine offered her services to raise funds. Never before nor since have I met anyone who actually asks to take on this risky and exhausting role, especially for a fledgling NGO that no one had heard of or was interested in. Moreover, she brought both fashion and fun to fundraising. As a former model, she launched the ALTA fashion show at the Hilton Ballroom, which blossomed into a bazaar and tea. The event included all the ALTA family and friends. A student designer was showcased and a few had booths. Sharmine's crash course in modelling attracted tutors and students, their friends and children. Even Sharmine's two sons walked the catwalk, possibly under some duress. Sharmine's dauntless spirit, flair and enthusiasm brought in the funds ALTA needed to get through the first years and set us on the road to buying our own building in Belmont.



Sharmine Nottingham at the opening of the ALTA office at Fernandes Compound



Sharmine's sister Sherry Ann Nottingham was ALTA's sole employee for several years, willingly turning her hand to any and everything from accounts and communicating with tutors to stacking books and killing roaches. She was not even put off by the daily climb up three flights of stairs when the office was relocated temporarily – for two years – to the building behind QPH.

Young ALTA models on the catwalk in creations by a student designer



Hilary at the QPH ALTA office backed by the library she helped create

Hilary Montgomery, Co-founder and Board Secretary 1992-1997

Marrying a Trini brought Hilary, a UK solicitor, to Woodbrook to teach with me, drawing on her training and experience as a voluntary adult literacy tutor in the UK from 1975-78. She embraced the idea of a networking organisation and at the first meeting came up with the name ALTA. Until we found an office, Hilary's home was ALTA's home, housing ALTA's records and materials and hosting planning and board meetings.

Hilary influenced every part of ALTA in the 1990s. In 1993, her class at Cascade Junior Life Centre became the second ALTA venue. She worked on developing Books 1-6 of the ALTA Adult Workbook series. Her visits to the UK became search expeditions for material for ALTA, to start the tutor library and to help us train tutors. As a tutor trainer and coordinator, she shared her experience and expertise with new volunteers.

By the late 1990s, Hilary opted to focus on motherhood. In 1998 she found her ALTA match – the Royal Gaol. A cramped, sweltering room with men seated on upside-down buckets merely strengthened her resolve to bring ALTA to the prisons. She worked assiduously to ensure that when her inmate students walked out onto Frederick Street, they would be armed with literacy, which hopefully would prove to be all the arming they needed.



Beverly with students receiving the free glasses she obtained for them

Beverly Yorke & Rosie Henderson, ALTA Administrators

Beverly came from government service working at cabinet level and Rosie from years in the private sector, but both brought a wealth of experience and expertise in office and event management. We continue to use the filing system fashioned by Beverly and implemented with precision by Rosie. Rosie brought the added benefit of having a resident artist to draw for publications and lend her artist's eye to our decor. As an excellent ALTA tutor, Beverly was the ideal first manager of ALTA's programme in the workplace.



Rosie at the ALTA staff and board Christmas lunch which she organised every year

Noble Phillip, Ruth Rawlins & the ALTA National Literacy Survey team

In 1994, Noreen De La Rosa and I met with Noble Phillip, then CEO of Market Facts and Opinions, to discuss a national literacy survey. Without hesitation, Noble agreed to conduct a random sample survey free of charge, once ALTA designed the literacy component and did the legwork. We walked out feeling thrilled, though a little stunned. Noble later mentioned his ready agreement may have owed a little to doubt that the two ladies meeting with him could get such a mammoth task off the ground.

We prepared the literacy questions in keeping with the Jamaican and Antiguan literacy surveys and marshalled the ALTA tutors who fanned out to walk the streets, knock on doors and talk to 1,868 people in 100 districts.

The Queen's Park Hotel bar was transformed into ALTA's survey base as a team of volunteers gathered by Noreen spent weeks coding the forms under the direction of ALTA tutor Ruth Rawlins, retired chief statistical officer at CSO. MFO analysed the data and Ruth Rawlins added a detailed analysis of 10 statistical tables (www.alta-tt.org – National Literacy Survey – View the statistical analysis). Ruth was a tremendous asset in this exercise and it still astounds me that we had just the person we needed within ALTA at the time.

Training Team

Paula Campbell (Singh) had intensive training with Dr Esla Lynch at Eshe's Learning Centre and years of classroom practice and experience with a range of learning disabilities. These made her fit easily into ALTA teaching and training of tutors. A few of the tutors who Paula trained may recall the raised eyebrows that were often all they needed to get back on track; but all will remember her irrepressible laugh, sense of fun and brisk, get-things-done approach that left no time for boredom. Paula brought the ALTA Programme to Sangre Grande, to children struggling in school and to the HIV+ children of the Cyril Ross Home.



Paula Campbell teaching the ALTA Programme to a private student at the ALTA office/training centre in Fernandes Industrial Estate



ALTA Patron

by Ira Mathur

Ira Mathur is a columnist with the Trinidad Guardian.

Zalayhar Hassanali, patron of ALTA, is known well beyond serving as First Lady of the nation from 1987 to 1997. During her position as First Lady, Mrs Hassanali was involved with 44 non-governmental organisations, charity groups and social foundations. She remains active in many of them to this day. Zalayhar Hassanali was born on May 3 1931 in Siparia. Her father, Ali Mohammed, was a tailor and her mother Khartoon was a seamstress. At 21 she married a lawyer who would eventually hold the highest office in this country, that of President – Noor Hassanali. Before becoming First Lady, Hassanali worked in education and served as a founding member of the Muslim Teachers' Association. The choice of Mrs Hassanali as patron for ALTA was easy as she is a perfect match. Not only did she have first-hand experience of teaching at primary level where reading is taught, but her genuine love of people and caring manner meant that she was as comfortable with heads of state as with ALTA tutors and students – and they with her.

Zena Puddy, a secondary school English teacher and member of the Strolling Players, who married an Englishman and taught adults at the Language and Literacy Unit in London, returned to live in Tobago just when we were putting together the first ALTA tutor training. Zena brought an in-depth knowledge of language issues to the training team which would lead to the early creation of an ALTA language policy (See 'Against the Odds'). Zena managed ALTA Tobago until their decision to form a separate organisation in 2000.



Zena Puddy conducting ALTA tutor training

Marie Louise Brown-Dottin

came to ALTA in 1994 with impressive academic credentials, an M.Phil. in Education and studying for her doctorate.

Fortunately she also had a gift for teaching literacy and a gentle, nurturing manner in sync with the evolving ALTA philosophy. She was quickly drafted into writing lessons for the workbooks and training tutors. These combined when she was part of the 1996-1997 IDB consultancy to develop a literacy component to be implemented by Servol. Marie-Louise no doubt remembers writing a literacy lesson on different types of chisels for woodworking trainees. As we put our heads together to write these lessons, the difference between literal and inferential comprehension became clear to us. Inferential comprehension calls for experience, and as none of us had ever held a chisel, far less several different types, we were all stuck at the literal level. In the late 1990s, Marie-Louise married a doctor, who promptly went to the UK to specialise and took Marie-Louise. But she is back in T&T, so...



Marie Louise Brown-Dottin trains tutors at the bar in QPH



Wallis Wyke giving a guest lecture at the 2011 ALTA tutor meeting

Wallis Wyke When I met Wallis on the Dyslexia Association course in 1992, I knew I had found a kindred spirit. She was wholly committed to literacy, always seeking new ideas and tools, and willing to put in the hours of preparation that made teaching look effortless – in other words, a professional teacher. Not only did Wallis have 20 years of experience in the primary classroom, she was also a trained and experienced workshop facilitator in the teaching of reading (1985-1989).

In 1993 Wallis and I spent days going through training manuals from the UK, US and Canada to map out every minute of the ALTA training course.

After getting her MEd, Wallis worked as a Reading coach in the Cayman Islands, but in 2010 returned home both to T&T – and to ALTA.

This was evident from her response to ALTA's request to be patron. Rather than just meeting with board members, she invited the board to tea at President's House with the President and herself, devoting the evening to getting to know ALTA. Her embracing of ALTA gave the fledgling NGO credibility. Over two decades, Mrs Hassanali has never missed an October annual meeting, is always on time and always full of warmth and praise – a true role model for all at ALTA.

The former first lady told Ira Mathur just why she is so committed to ALTA's work.

"My support for ALTA is so wholehearted because I was a teacher myself. I taught primary and secondary school maths, English, science. You have to have a passion for teaching, a love for people and a deep desire to see them improve. When Paula Lucie-Smith asked me to be patron I said "definitely" without thinking twice, as she has all this and she has a passion for ALTA which is inspiring.

Many of ALTA's students either had to leave school because they were poor and had to go to work, or parents took them out of school or they simply dropped out. Young people misbehave in schools because they can't read and they prefer to be put out of class so they are not embarrassed. They don't realise the long-term repercussions of being functionally illiterate.

All these years when it was said that literacy is high in this country, it was not correct. A lot of people can't even read signs, cannot fill forms. ALTA is filling the gap.

When we were growing up, we loved to read and were encouraged to do so by our parents and teachers. In our time there was no such thing as lessons. If a child was not keeping up, we would get them in at lunch or after school and help them with what was bothering them. Now extra lessons are normal for everyone.

I feel fortunate to have seen so many changes, and all the technology. We didn't have the privilege of the internet or Skype, but I sometimes wonder if we are concentrating too much on technology and not enough on people and helping others. There is no shortage of brilliant children in our schools. There are many parents who push their children to do their best and many dedicated teachers. But there are still too many students who don't have motivation or ambition, which partially has to do with teaching methods and partially to do with changing attitudes in our society.

If I could, I would have loved to go out and teach at ALTA. There is so much need. And so many need the tools to help themselves. ALTA is doing both."



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Fundraising 101

by Paula Lucie-Smith

Cake Sale Check out the venue during the time planned for the sale or the tropical sun may light up your stall and cause mass meltdown in minutes. Desperately slashing prices and foisting items on passers-by may help reduce how much you have to eat. Obviously you can't dump all that hard work.

BBQ and Other Qs There will always be people who find their ticket hours, days, years afterwards – or never. Sell to anyone who asks for an extra box on the day. Otherwise once again you face eating, in this case 20-50 meals at a time when you never want to see a BBQ again. The give-away option is out as you have already sold tickets to everyone you know and everyone your friends know, and you discover that health restrictions prevent institutions from accepting food.

A Walk for... Overused and involves a lot more than walking! There's lots to organise, things you never thought of like bottled water – then disposing of hundreds of bottles. But the biggest challenge is keeping the group together as required.

The professional walkers are speeding to the finish line; the novices trying to return to the starting line; and somewhere in the middle are some very large but very determined people who make you

thank God you arranged for an on-site ambulance.

Don't expect any awareness impact as no one outside the group has any idea what you are walking for.

Raffle Schools have this cornered. Because the children are instructed "Take home these tickets and don't bring back

any unsold", anyone who enters raffle territory will forever have to reciprocate by buying raffle tickets from those who bought from them. Do a profit/loss analysis beforehand to determine if switching to auctioning off the prizes would make more than ticket sales considering your costs in time, calls and printing.

Top-up Auction Bidders pay the difference between their bid and the previous bid. Works wonderfully when you have a popular item, a big captive group and an auctioneer with oomph! At an ALTA tutor meeting of almost 100 tutors, a tutor donated two tickets to a sold-out concert she could no longer attend. Lystra did her version of the dollar wine as hands waved excitedly with dollar, dollar, dollar!



Events Beware the free venue as it may come with pricy food and drink, as well as surprise cleaning costs. In your cost analysis, factor in staff time, phone calls, non-delivery on promises and quadruple supplies of painkillers. As the date approaches, the committee whittles down to the volunteers who are already overburdened and the staff who are already overworked and underpaid. Factor in the diversion away from your core work and the backlog of this waiting for the day after the event. David Rudder sums it up: "This is not a fete in here – this is madness."

Donations Official NGO terms: Grant request/sponsorship/proposal; Official corporate term: Corporate Social



Responsibility (CSR); Unofficial term used by both: Begging letters. This is the obvious first choice for funds. Unfortunately all fund-seekers think this – who wouldn't? Write a letter and get money. So the beggars outnumber the donors several thousand to one.

Not surprising then that most begging letters are never seen or heard of once they leave you. Call, email; call, email. No news is bad news.

Guard against donations luring you off course. Donors want to fund what

you are not doing, mistakenly assuming that if you are doing it, you must have the funds to continue doing it. To get their funds, you have to start a new project. They support this for one year, maybe two, outside chance three years as they need to "share it around". Then you are back where you started – seeking a new donor for a current project.

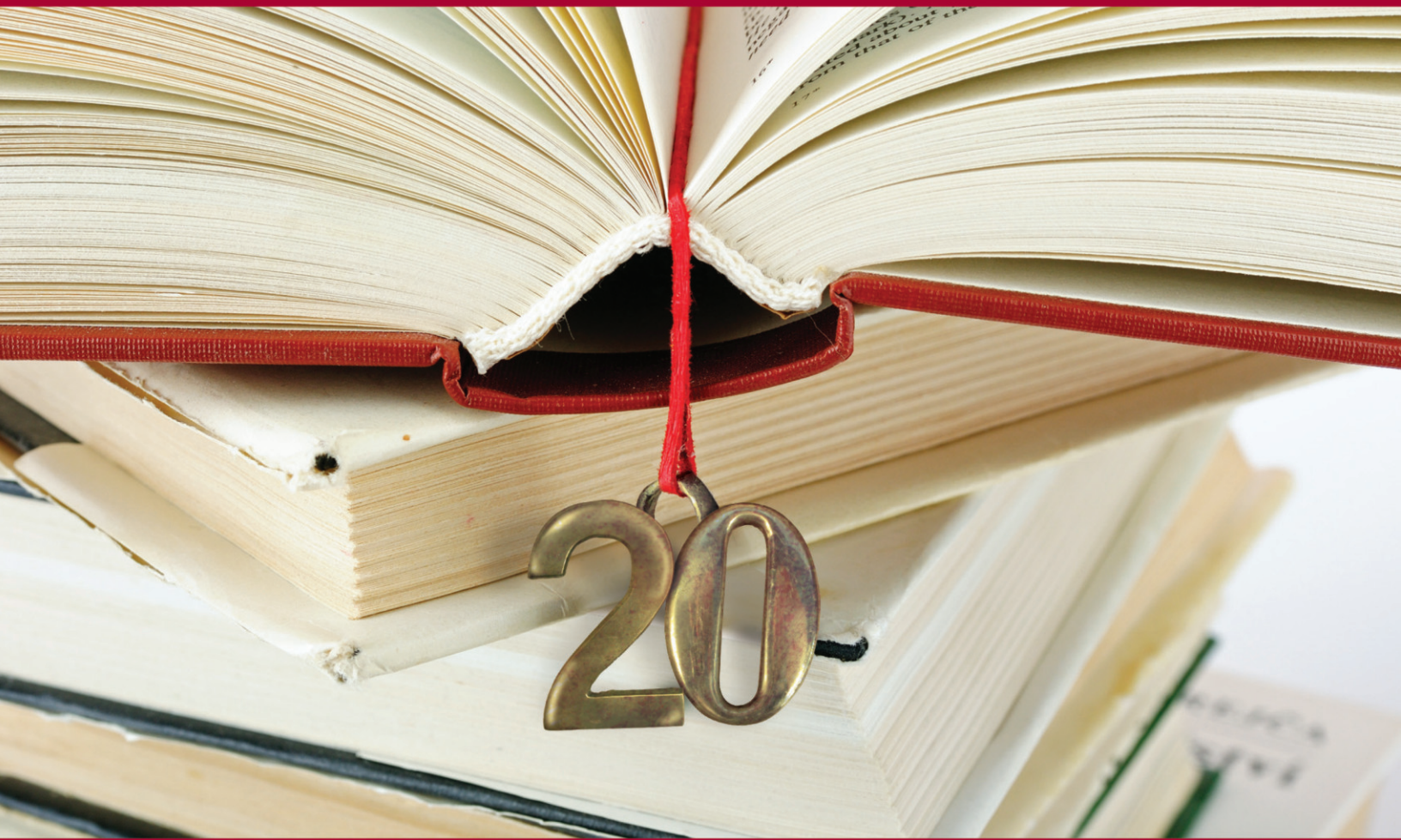
Very occasionally, your work itself so impresses that you get a cheque of unusual size to be used as needed, maybe even unsolicited!

After two decades, you are lucky if you have ten funders you can count on and one or two who ask nothing more than that you continue doing the work you do best. Every day that ALTA continues to exist and to provide a quality, much-needed service, says 'thank you' to our donors who give year after year.

P.S. If you are intrepid and the lessons above inspire rather than repel you, the now virtually friendless Friends of ALTA awaits you. But first, as I did, take up yoga and learn the many ways to breathe.



On the occasion of their **20th** Anniversary



CIBC FirstCaribbean congratulates the
Adult Literacy Tutors Association of Trinidad and Tobago.

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed it is the only thing that ever has. - Margaret Mead

Congratulations to ALTA, a leader in adult education.



Last Friday...Paula Lucie-Smith received the Hummingbird Medal Gold award for adult education for her work with Adult Literacy Teachers Association (ALTA)

Grande to Mayaro, from Diego Martin to Point Fortin, and all in between. Everywhere in the country...

Asked how she had got involved in adult literacy she said that as a teacher in a comprehensive school she had first encountered the issue of reading problems. "As a teacher, we feel very helpless...

programme was equally applicable to adults or teenagers, and the group had in fact just completed a nine-month programme with a group of ten teenagers".

ALTA's next project, she said, would be to introduce an adult literacy programme to Golden Grove Prison. "We are looking for a sponsor to take our programme into Golden Grove and other prisons". She said ALTA had just introduced an adult literacy programme to Carrera Prison, where inmates taught each other, and she hoped to use that as a model for other prisons. She was very keen on...

National Awards



PRESIDENT Arthur NR Robinson presents the Humming Bird Medal Gold to Paula Jehanne Lucie-Smith during yesterday's National Awards ceremony at President's House. Photo: KENNY...



PRESENTATION: Officials browsing through some of the books. From left, Dr Hyacinth Mc Dowall, Curriculum Officer, Reading; Hollis Mc Knight, Director of Educational Services; Paula Lucie-Smith, President of ALTA; British High Commissioner, Brian Smith; Kenrick Seepersad, Director of Curriculum Development; and Vittie De La Granade, Executive Officer of ALTA. Photo by HERMAN ROOP DASS.

British books for ALTA

By HERMAN ROOP DASS

THE BRITISH High Commissioner's Office has donated a collection of books to the ALTA Association...

help groups that show in a tangible way that they have done something positive to help themselves."

He said that the commission was satisfied that the ALTA had a very ambitious programme geared towards improving the literacy rate in Trinidad and Tobago and in that regard "we are pleased to be associated with such a project."

He said that his office "is keen on improving the quality of life of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago and anything that we can do to encourage investors to come to your country by way of improving the overall climate, we will be willing to help in any way possible."

President of ALTA, Paula Lucie-Smith, thanked the British High Commissioner's Office for its generosity and promised to "harness all our resources to successfully implement our programme so as to get as close as is possible to a 100% literacy target in Trinidad and Tobago."

ALTA was formed at the conclusion of an Adult Literacy Programme which was held in 1990 (International Literacy Year) under the aegis of the Ministry of Education and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO).

Gallery

People • Art • Life • Style

ALTA cited for literacy work in TT

By MELISSA DASSRATH

PAULA LUCIE-SMITH, the founder of the Adult Literacy Teachers Association (ALTA), garnered international attention when American First Lady Laura Bush remarked about her work with literacy in Trinidad and Tobago at a recent White House Symposium on Advancing Global Literacy.

On a global scale, one in five adults cannot read or write. This fact led to the United Nations Literacy Decade which was launched on February 13, 2003. The theme "Literacy as Freedom" expresses the collective will of the international community to promote a literate environment for all in developing and developed countries.

they may have good intentions but do not have the structure, approaches and strategies for teaching. There was the understanding that this is necessary to ensure that the delivery of an adult education programme is effective. That is where ALTA is different, in many respects. So in a lot of ways going to conference reaffirmed that we were on the right track and a lot of what we have been doing fits into what the current thinking is."

Lucie-Smith explained how basic brochures dispensed at the conference made its way to the White House. "I passed out some ALTA fact sheets at the conference and also gave one to Benita Somerfield..."

and that they are engaged. You must incorporate what the student wants to read, so when they complete a literacy class that they can go out there and jump into life. So you have to deliver a programme that meets their needs. What they learn must be functional for their lives, but we simplify for them."

Lucie-Smith stated that ALTA's curriculum is designed around widely-practiced international educational principles: "Our programme is very much influenced by the Orton-Gillingham Method that was developed in the US. What we do is also linked to the work of Paulo Freire from Brazil. He is regarded as the icon of adult education. His most well-known phrase is: 'Read the word and see the world'."

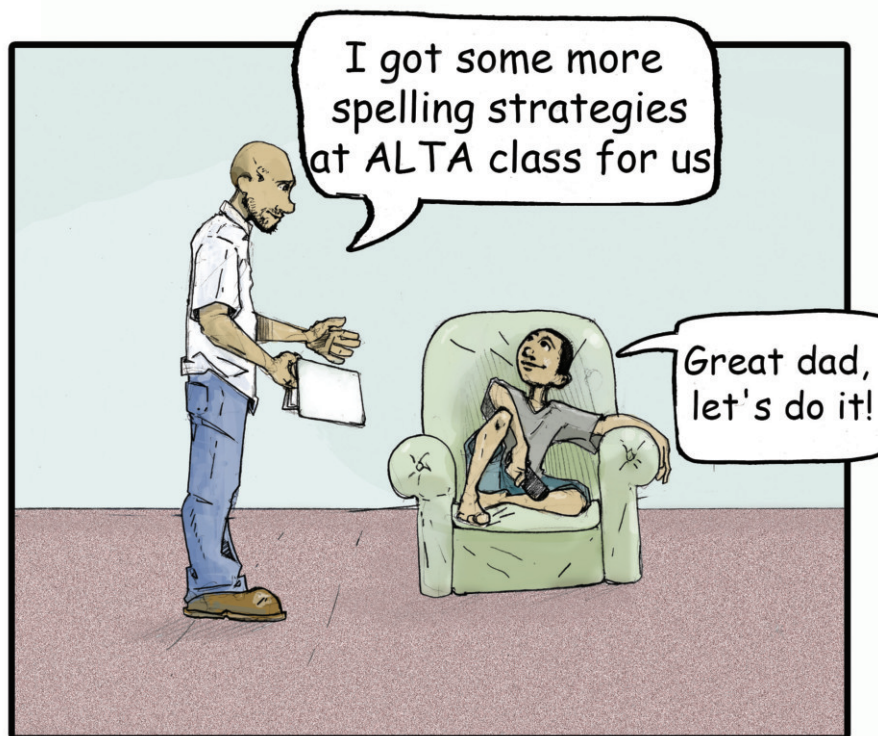
or maybe had emotional trauma that interrupted their studies. For people who cannot read, school was a very negative experience. So we try to create a different environment that is nurturing and not competitive." There is a Beginner's Class for people who may or may not know the letters of the alphabet or the fine motor skills required to write with a pencil. Then there are Levels 1, 2 and 3. The highest level is aimed at further equipping persons who want to go on to formal schooling, for those who wish to pass CXC subjects or those who have a job and feel that they have hit a barrier because their literacy skills cannot support upward movement. ALTA workbooks teach...

Section 2: ALTA Students

Before ALTA...



After ALTA...



FACTS & STATS

- More than 10,660 students have attended ALTA free community classes since the year 2000.
- Annual registration at public libraries for free adult literacy classes on the first Tuesday and Wednesday of the academic year (Sept).
- 2012 impact survey shows 100% would recommend ALTA; 86% achieved their expectations; 82% rated the tutors excellent and 52% earned higher salaries on completing ALTA.



Who are Adult Learners? A perspective

by Lystra Hazarie, *ALTA Tutor, Trainer & Regional Coordinator*

This year, 2012, ALTA is celebrating its 20th anniversary and I am reflecting on my learning over the 15 years since I joined ALTA. That's right, I said, learning. It's taken a while but I have come to realise that an extraordinary thing about teaching is the amount of learning that it entails. I firmly believe that an adult tutor is also an adult learner.

All but a few of the new tutors coming to ALTA year after year declare that they are interested in doing the tutor training course 'to give back to the community,' 'to help others discover the joy of reading' – hardly ever do they suggest that they want to learn how to teach people to read and write.

ALTA's Tutor Training Course gives volunteers special training in teaching adults to read and write over a six-day in-house training course followed by a nine-month in-service classroom practicum. Teaching an adult to read and write has many similarities, yet provides a very different experience from teaching a young child. Adults have a wealth of practical experience to facilitate the teaching-learning process.

How do people learn to teach at ALTA? Well, I believe that education is about aptitude and attitude. That said, I would suggest that you try to forget everything you feel you already know and direct your energies at being both receptive and expressive. The things you had been taught previously will come back to you if they're any good, if not – it might be a relief to let go of all that stuff. Next, you just have to get right into it. There are times in the teaching of phonics that you might need to say to your student, "Look at my mouth, what is my tongue doing?" Huh! That's right, I did and you will too, if you want your students to benefit from the mouth movements and 'feeling the sounds'. Inhibitions step aside, get ready to pucker up and model the mouth movements.

ALTA training is never-ending. Just in case you plan to press 'pause' after the tutor training course and perhaps attend the June meeting as a brain cooler – think again! Every ALTA get together is an opportunity for learning. We learn more about ourselves, each other and about our students from guest speakers who are doctors, priests, psychologists, educators and other professionals, on a variety of pertinent topics. Initially, I thought that adult education was about people going to community 'night' classes, (ad infinitum), and later included ALTA students age 16 and over. I know better now. Adult education is also about me attending my first ever ALTA training session at Queen's Park Hotel on Albion Court with a purse size dictionary and grammar text hidden in my bag – because I just didn't know if and when malapropism would overtake me. I did not want to be found lacking. I wanted to come across as knowledgeable and somewhat intelligent. Who doesn't?

When I read this student's account of her first day at an ALTA class, it became remarkably clear to me that we, tutors and students, are in this adult learning experience together. She

wrote, "The Day I Came to ALTA I was very novas and a little inbairst oning that I codnot read but when I sow that day way oddos like my sevelf. I was not inbarst eanymoor."

UNESCO (1997) defines adult education as "the entire body of ongoing learning processes...whereby adults develop their abilities, enrich their knowledge and improve their technical or professional qualifications...to meet their own needs and those of their society." The UNESCO definition epitomises both the ALTA tutor and ALTA student. Paula and Yvonne, Cynthia and Chadwick, Lystra and Rhonda, Agatha and Jesse, Grace and Lakhan, are just a few of ALTA's adult learner teams I've encountered along the way. I recall that a student at the Golden Grove Prison once said to me that he could not learn. He would not have known that by observing his willingness to keep trying and his pleasant and humble demeanour, this tutor became his student. I believe that learning is about both attitude and aptitude and in spite of the barriers to learning and self-fulfilling prophecy or mantra which he posited, with time he was able to learn to read and write his name.

ALTA has permeated my daily life. I regularly meet people at the market, on the bus, everywhere and anywhere, who call me "Miss". The question I often ask myself is: tutor or student? There's no easy way of knowing, so I flash a smile and ask, in my best Creole English, "How yuh class goin'?" Sometimes the answer clears up the mystery and sometimes it doesn't, but what does it matter when we are in this thing together. The potentially embarrassing thing is that some people who are neither ALTA students nor tutors make a basic assumption about who I am by reading the message, 'ALTA Teaching adults to read and write' off my shirts. At last count I owned twelve ALTA shirts so it is perhaps reasonable to assume, like my mother did, that the message is tattooed on my back.

15 years later I can say that ALTA made me do it and my family supported it. I've taught at the prisons, co-authored ALTA publications, written a book chapter, developed a spelling programme, adapted primary school reading materials, led teams of ALTA tutors into mainstream teacher training both at home and abroad, became a lifelong learner, kindled ALTA students' entrepreneurial spirits, and most significantly I continue to meet the people who make it possible.

As a practising adult learner I continue to rely heavily on the teaching-learning relationships that have developed over the years. These perhaps represent ALTA's hidden curriculum in the form of Earlyn and Lilian, tireless in their support behind the scenes; Marise and Arlene, unknowingly teaching me how to listen – a work in progress; and Paula and Maureen, whose positive reinforcement of my hare-brained ideas gives me the impetus to persevere. I thank God for the blessings, ALTA for the learning and Microsoft Word Thesaurus for the words.

Student Writing

The World of Books – Now My World

Amanda Colley, Level 2 Couva South

I just don't want to read one book. There are so many different kinds of things to read in this world. There are books, magazines and newspapers. These are some of the things we read for information, for learning experiences, as a hobby to relax and to enjoy or it's telling us about what is going on in everyday life.

When I become an excellent reader I can read everything and anything I want with no help. I want to go on wonderful journeys to different countries and places, seeing all their outstanding beauty around the world. Going on amazing adventures to explore the unknown and discovering new nations. To go on the biggest hunt that the world have ever see, to solve the greatest mysteries or to be the hero of the day or go back in time to find out about our history and heritage or what our future holds.

When we read it makes us feel happiness, sorrow, love, hate, laughter, anger, knowledge, understanding, wisdom, faith, inspirational, finding solutions to problems, drama, action and so much more.

To read and to understand what you are reading and being part of the wonderful stories, it's a remarkable feeling. Getting excited over what you are reading and wondering what is going to happen on the next page. You don't know what to expect, what the writer is going to write about.

When I'm finished reading, my family, friends, classmates, tutors and everyone who I know and love will be so proud of me. I will encourage others to read so they can get excited over reading.

I cry on my first day at ALTA

I attended primary school. I had problems reading but I had no help from the teachers. I wrote what at that time was called common entrance examination; however I failed my two chances. After leaving primary school I did short courses like YTEPP but I still can't read properly. I hoped and prayed that no one would find out; it was difficult to write a simple grocery list. I tried hard to read on my own but I met a lot of words I didn't know how to pronounce. If I had something to read in class I will read it at home before class. I decided that I can't continue with this so I try to find a course that I can take to improve my reading and spelling but there was no class at time that I can take. Years had pass until I saw an advertisement in the newspaper about ALTA programme. At first I was ashamed being my age and not being able to read properly but when I went to register for class I was surprised to see a lot of older persons than myself and I didn't feel bad any more, instead I plan to finish ALTA at all cost. My reading have improve and my spelling. I have big plans for my life and ALTA is helping me to improve and achieve my goals in my life.

A lot of people in my life don't know this about me but by the time they know I won't be in this position.

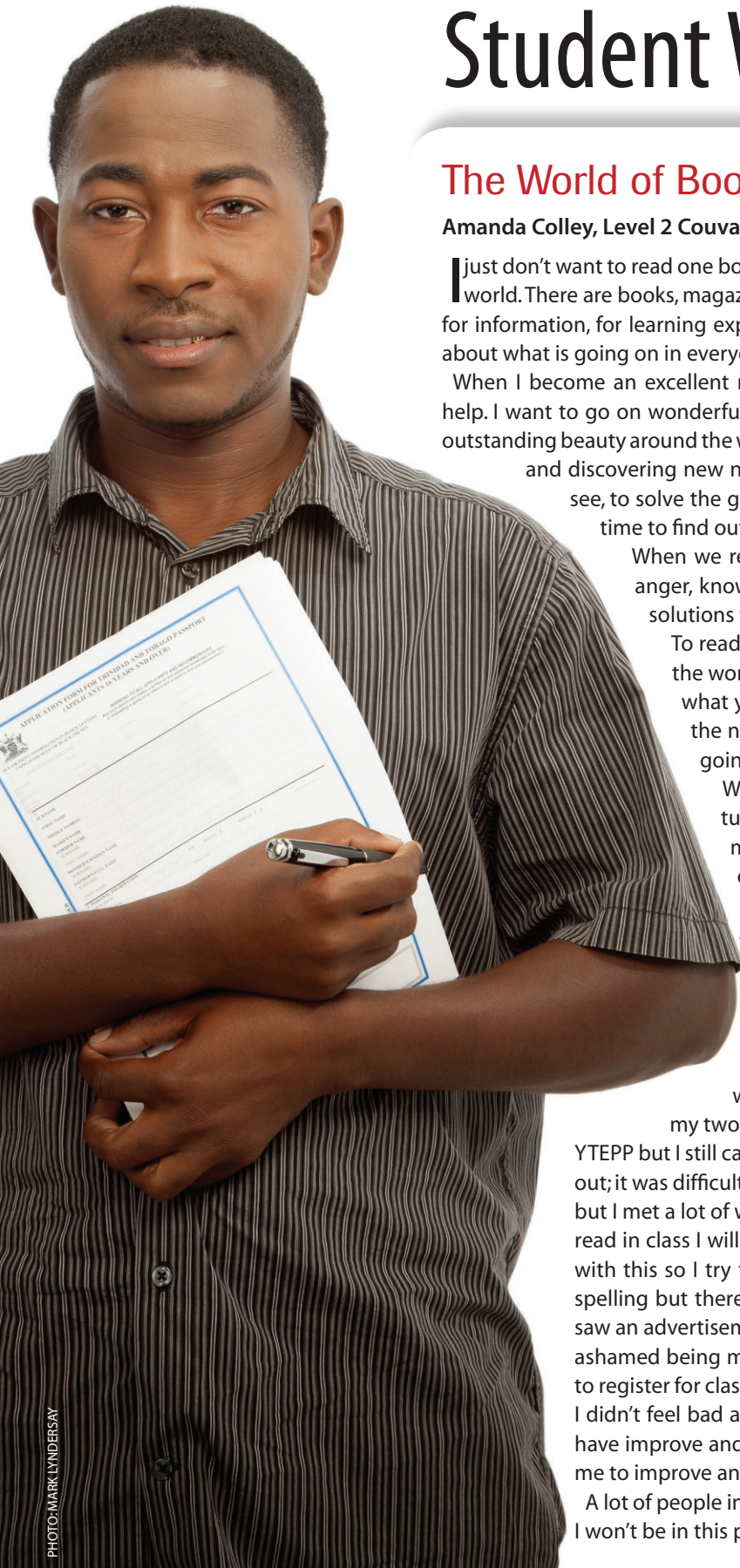


PHOTO: MARK LYNDERSAY

How I became an ALTA Student

Charlene Lee Tung, Level 3 Montrose Gov't Primary

Long time ago I met the love of my life. He told me that he was working in the Unemployment Relief Programme. He started to ask me question about how far I reach in school. I looked at him and shake my head and bow. Tears flow from my eyes. He looked at me and hug me and told me that alright.

One Tuesday morning he call me and say to me I would like to took you to dinner. I were very frightened. While having dinner he told me I have two things I want you to do. Firstly he told me he was looking at television one night. He told me there is a free course going to start about learning to read and write. I jump up and said to him my neighbour told my parents about the course. Eventually we finished dinner. We take a walk and looked for a car to drop me home. He told my parents good night and he also told me he will call them on the telephone.

The next day he visited my home again. He sat and waited for my father. As the time came closer I were very scared. There was my father coming from a distance. My father reached home, take a shower and got something to eat. When he finished eating, he went and met my boyfriend in the gallery. Then I left and went inside. While drinking some water there I heard my boyfriend and my father discussing about ALTA. When reaching back to the gallery, I overheard my father asking my friend...What is ALTA about. My father told my friend his neighbour told him about it. Eventually my father call all his children to sit down. My sister and I were over the age of sixteen to join the class. My friend also told my parents he works URP and also he said to my parents he got me in the programme to do checker work. But I must continue my classes with ALTA.

Eventually I got married and I have no regrets of joining ALTA. To date I am still with them in Level 3. I am looking to spend one year with them. After that year I am looking to write the CXC examination and passing the English. I can help my husband in his business and my daughter in her school work.



*Charlene Lee Tung
with her husband*

On the Road to Success

**Pamela McAlpin-Polydore, Level 2
NALIS AM**



Life for me was a challenge because the day that my mother give birth and she came out of hospital, she discard her baby in a dustbin. My body was covered in biting ants and worms from the food in the bin was also on my body the following day.

The next day a woman was emptying her rubbish and saw this baby panting for breath. She took this baby out of the bin, carry it to the hospital for treatment and took care of me until the age of nine years old. My mother was nowhere to be found.

Upon reaching that tender age the woman told me I would have to go and look for work to maintain myself. I told her I don't know where to go she said, "You go on! You will find somewhere to go." I started to cry and pack my belongings and head down the road, walking until it became dark. I look for a cardboard box and I slept on the pavement until morning.

The next day I went from house to house asking if they need anybody to work. I found a house where they took me in and I started to sweep and scrub house. I never got the opportunity to go to school. I worked there for five years. The treatment was terrible. They work me to a frazzle. If I don't do something they ask me to do, they will physically abuse me and burn my fingers.

I got fed up and one day I left and went back on the pavement, I was fourteen years old at that time. It was a challenge because of the elements that was out here. Food was a problem, so I had to beg to survive.

One day a good Samaritan saw this young girl on the pavement and rescue me and put me in a shelter where things was going fine for about one year and after that I got married at 16 years, started making children and couldn't get to educate myself because I have to see about the children.

Now all four of my children is grown, I can now try to educate myself to the best of my ability. This is the reason why I chose ALTA to start from foundation and to get my passes and then proceed to my degree.

Finding a New Dream

Monica Garcia, Level 3 Woodbrook Government Secondary

I was born in a small village on the North East coast of the island, the house a small wooden one with a living room, one bedroom and an added-on kitchen. This was shared with four other siblings. Times were very hard back then for my mother and us with our father not being around to help, the story being told that he left my mother when I was just a baby.

There was no gas stove, running water, electricity in those days in the countryside. Back then, we used fireside. This was done by placing three stones in a small shed outside in the yard. As a child, I loved going in the cocoa estate with my other siblings to gather sticks or wood to light the fire. We got our water from a small ravine which ran between our house and our grandmother's. It has a large piece of wood for us to cross. In the ravine, we made a pool and have fun.

Behind our house was a cocoa estate. There we would go for mangoes and mamee seepote, yam, cush cush and oranges which we called cocoa oranges. Just imagine the juice of those sweet oranges and mangoes rolling down your hands. Those days, we had something called mango fight with boys from the village. Imagine getting up four o'clock in the morning to reach under a mango tree before other boys get there only to find out that you are still late; going by the river with our mother to wash clothes and holding crawfish, making a fire and roasting it right there and eating it. That, at times, would be our lunch because our mother would spend the whole day by the river to wash and dry clothes.

As children, we thought our mother had a clock in her brain because exactly at 3 o'clock every morning she would get up and after that she would be saying the time at every hour. My other siblings and I got up before sunrise to prepare for school. In order to get us to school, we had to journey about quarter mile. I entered primary school at the age of five.

During my primary school years, I was an excellent

student always first or second in test. I even had very good handwriting. One of my teachers told my mother, so that made me proud. After I sat the Common Entrance Exam at the age of ten, I passed and moved on to secondary school. I spent my first three years at a

Junior Secondary School and my last two years at a Senior Comprehensive School where I sat the CXC Exam. I did not fare well in the exams. Even though I can read and write something made me fail those subjects. That left a void in my life. My goals and dreams I did not achieve.

Disappointment was a big factor in my life until one day something just shook me up and said, "Don't be so hard on yourself. You can still achieve your goal. Just go back to school. You can read and write." So from then on I have been trying, trying my hands first at English. I failed because my essay writing is poor. I know that I need help in that area. When I heard my brother, who could barely read and write, talk about a programme called ALTA which he attended, I told myself these people can help me because they are helping my brother who is proud of his achievements today. After putting it off for a couple of years, I finally made up my mind. As someone who always listens to the radio and reads the daily newspaper, I heard and saw the advertisement about the next upcoming classes of ALTA. I took courage and with my head held high I went and signed up.

As my goal of becoming a nurse did not come true, I also have another dream and this is becoming a plumber. Having received some basic training in this field, I intend to pursue it further. We all have goals and dreams that may not come true at the time but we must not lose hope in whatever we believe in.



Putting It on Paper

Chanka Siewnarine, Level 3 Montrose Government Primary, Chaguanas

I worked at a scrap yard in 2003, my work was scrapping engine for parts. Two years after I was ask to price the parts. One year later I become a salesman for use parts and body. I knew my work so well, but don't know to make a bill. I knew the price of the parts, but can't put it on paper. I knew the prices of engine, transmission, brainbox, harness. Also body parts, park light, headlight, fender, and bumper B13, B14, mechanical and body parts.

One day we work late, the next day I went to work. No one came to work. Someone came to buy an engine and the salesman had to make a bill. I can't make the bill, I knew price, but can't spell.

Every morning I buy an Express to look through. One day I saw the ALTA ad on the Express. It take me seven days to make the call but I did so. I am benefiting from ALTA now.

Scared

Alicia Ramnanan

I attend ALTA class now. My reading has improved. I am 23 years old.

When I was a child I had problems reading, from when I could remember I was four years old, my parents was separated. My father was a workaholic and he didn't have time for my sister and I. My sister and I went to live with our mother. She was renting. At first it was nice, but we started moving from house to house. We lived in nine different houses and attended three different primary schools. The first primary school we went to was fine because we knew what was going on. But the other two primary schools were hard because the teachers didn't understand us. Our mother knew but she didn't have time to help us.

At age 15, my sister and I started working. At age 17 we started living on our own. At age 22, I was watching television and saw the ALTA program. I told my sister about it and we went together and we started at Level 2. We finish Level 2 and my sister and I were happy we passed. We were supposed to start Level 3 but she died. She always wanted to take classes with teachers who would understand her and ALTA give her that.

I would like to say to ALTA and the teachers, thank you for making our dreams. I am now in Level 3 and I know my sister would be proud of me.



School Days

Ellis Moore, Level 2 Curepe
Holy Saviour Church

The reason why I did not learn to read is because I didn't wanted to, I hated school! Mainly because of all the licks I got to learn my school work.

I recall one incident in first year. The teacher was teaching us about colours. She beat me because I coloured my shapes in more than one colour. I

liked how it was looking! I loved drawing and colouring at a very young age. Instead of encouraging me for my artistic ability, she beat me!

In another incident in a different class the teacher called me a dunce only because I got my work wrong. That had a serious effect on me all my life. I spent my entire school time playing the fool, not doing home work, telling my mother that the teacher didn't give us any homework and would get my self into all sorts of trouble with all of my teachers.

When I finished secondary school I tried going to evening class but could not cope because of my reading problem. Starting a family at a very young age just after leaving school took up plenty of my time over the years.

After all those years of working, the main challenge was helping my children with their home work. A few years later I saw JW and Blaze on the television. They were speaking about the ALTA classes provided for persons with reading problems. When I see that advertisement, a flame inside of me ignite! Saying to myself this is something I must do right away, I went down to the Tunapuna library and registered and now I am learning to read, thanks to ALTA.

Building My Literacy Skills

Shirley Ollivierre, Level 3 Cascade

When starting to construct a building, it takes time and planning. You need to have a piece of land, a surveyor, an architect, a builder, materials, tools and workmen.

I started ALTA adult classes at Cascade a few years ago, not being as regular as I should. I realize that learning is like constructing a building. You have to go in stages. First of all you need a piece of land. Well I am that piece of land. The surveyor, architect and the builder are volunteer workers. Such persons are Hilary, Paula, Judy and Noreen. The materials are the desks and chairs.

The work began four hours per week. The volunteer teachers to start the foundation were Hilary, Noreen, Ginnie and Andre. The phonics is the foundation. The blocks going up is putting the phonics together and being able to spell and read.

The electrician and the plumber are also volunteer workers. Such persons are Kathy, Moy, Marlene, Felicia, Donna and Mr. Bob. The electrician and the plumber play a great part. When plastering the building it takes time and patience because you have to put on mortar and then smoothen it. You also have to make up the edges and columns. The paint also helps to bring out the beauty of the building. This evening, I represent the paint by being able to come out of the class and present this reading to one and all.

The Level 3 work takes a lot of time to make sure that everything is completed. The volunteer person who is conducting the plastering and the painting is Sadie. We know it is not an easy task. We all are praying the Heavenly Father will continue to give you all love and patience on this journey.

Thanks to all the volunteer workers at ALTA on this journey to success.

Leaving the Past Behind

Afisha Hill, Level 2 Belmont PM

I was born on the 11th November 1987. I am 25 years old and live in Sogren Trace, Laventille, East Port of Spain. My mother grew up as a country girl in Toco. When she was old enough, she went to live with my father in Santa Cruz. When I knew myself, I was living there. I am the only child of my parents.

At the age of four, I did not see much of my father. He had already left my mother. Yet I began to know the many boyfriends that my mother had. They would come home, spend some time, or visit regularly and then disappear. As I grew to understand what was happening in my mother's life, I began to hate our situation. I used to wonder whether change would come.

My mother used to be very kind and generous to me. She gave me all that she could afford. Although I was never comfortable with her boyfriends, I loved her very dearly and never let her know my feelings. One day, something strange happened to me which caused me to speak out.

I was five years old when her latest boyfriend fully fondled my body from my little breasts downwards. Mammy was not at home so he got his chance. When my mother arrived, I began to tell her in tears what went on. Shockingly, she refused to believe me and said that I was lying on the man. My world crashed that day. I lost hope, faith, trust and grounding in my mother. Who was there to turn to? My mind became messed up as I daily watched her listening and believing in all the boyfriend had to tell my mother about my attitude towards him.

One day, my mother told me that we had to move from where we were living. This was more horrors for me, because in my six years we had moved so many times in and around Santa Cruz that I was truly fed up of it. Later she told me that we were going to move out of the district to a place called Laventille. It was the same sick boyfriend that she was going to live with. My God!

Laventille was quite different from Santa Cruz. City life was new to me. I used to like watching the bright city lights from our new home on the hill and hoped that they would brighten up my future which looked empty and sad. Nobody but God knew the grief of my little heart as I walked to and from school.

Needless to say that the boyfriend felt free to touch me whenever he wished once my mother was not at home. Just to avoid the ill feelings we could have for each other, I chose to tell her nothing at all about those moments. So I suffered many years of sexual abuse in silence. The man never had a regular job. So of course, I couldn't go to school regularly at times. Sometimes I would be absent for an entire week.

I used to be an A student when I lived in Santa Cruz and in Laventille during the early days of my stay. Then slowly I began to fall back in my work. You see, it was hard for me to catch up on the work that I missed. My mother could not help because she couldn't read nor write well. Then there was the falling out between she and the boyfriend. Sometimes they would turn

nasty and he would beat my mother. Frustration and vexation used to eat me out.

In time it became the norm for me to be without school books, shoes, sneakers and socks, lunch, snacks, clothes and uniform. I used to feel that something bad would happen to me with all those negatives in my life. I was getting older and needed more things for school.

One evening I came from school and began doing my homework. The boyfriend came home drunk as a fish and called me out to spell the word "cherry" for him. I could not spell the word. He then called his niece next door to spell the word. She spelt it correctly and to my surprise and shame, the man began to insult me loudly, calling me a dunce and a fool, unable to learn anything.

Once my father bought me some school books. There were no more visits that I can remember. Life only grew harder for me as time went by. School work became more and more difficult to grasp. With all my ambition I just could not make it. Words were difficult to identify. I made mistakes when I had to spell a simple word. My tables were hard to remember. After a while, I gave up trying to learn anything.

This situation is only a part of a long and sad story, making it sufficient for you to understand how I was robbed of a basic education.

Today I can say that the worst times of my life is behind me. I am serious about my education. I would not let my then step-father's words come to pass. I would grasp the opportunity offered by ALTA and lift myself to a higher level than I am at present.

Last Man Standing

Manasseha Mohammed, Level 3,
International School, Westmoorings

Have you ever been asked by your best friend to spell something and you had to change the topic? Well this is my dilemma, often too many times. I often blamed my parents for this but with my mother working to put food on the table and a father who beats you, who will want to speak to him? I never thought that the future would have held so many moments where you would be ashamed when you couldn't read something.

I never had any major problem at school because we worked in groups. I also learned that whenever you sit among smart people and don't say anything you too are smart. With this method I came out of school with 3 passes.

I started to work right after leaving school in a factory. Life

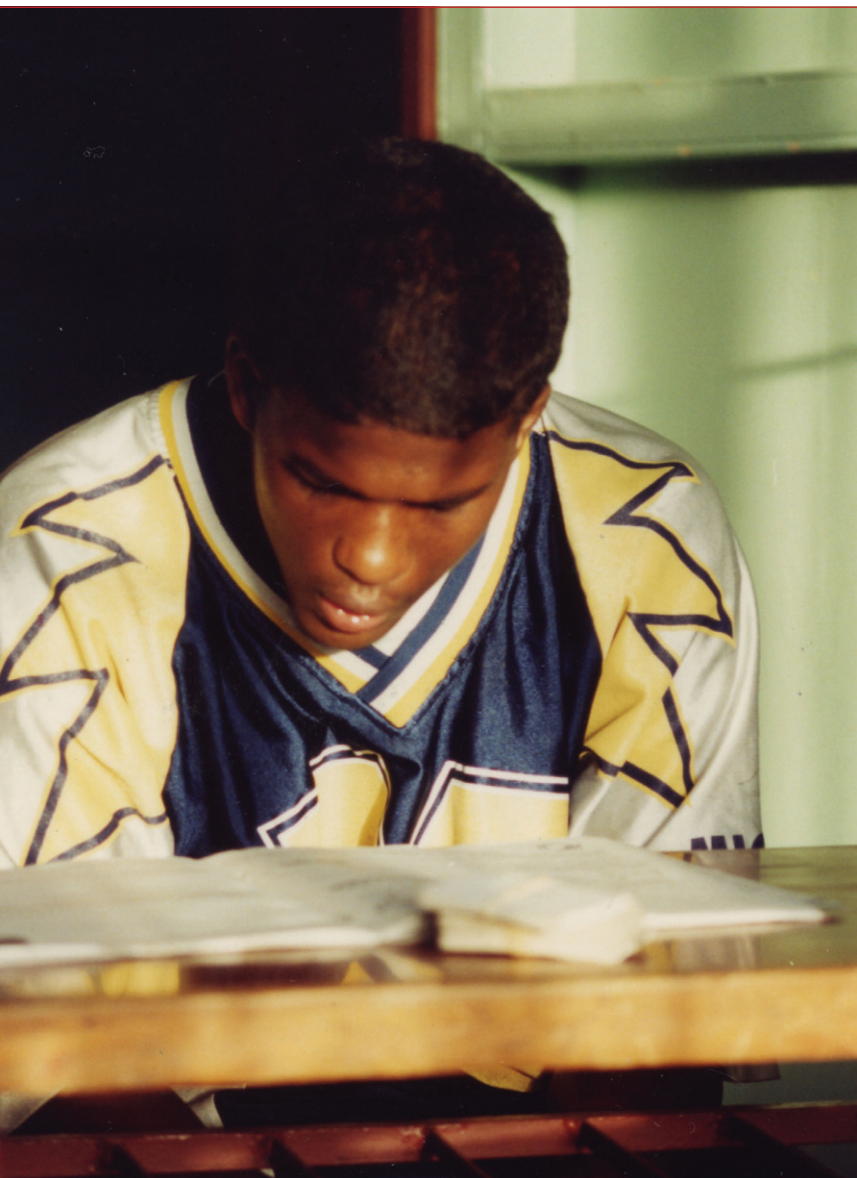


PHOTO: ALEX SMAILES

A Better Father

Matthew, Level 3 Woodbrook Government Secondary

One day, my daughter asked me how to spell November. I was so embarrassed that I could not spell it. I told her to ask her mother, I looked in her eyes and saw, "My father can't help me with my homework". She said, "Why, Daddy, should I wait until Mommy comes home from work? Why can't you help me?" I told her call her mother on the phone. So I called Rhonda's phone and gave the phone to her.

I wanted to help her but I couldn't spell or read. I am a bad father. What kind of man can't help his child with homework? I was ashamed, Rhonda and I just had a newborn son. What was his faith in me? "I need to do something about this now". There was an ALTA ad on the radio saying ALTA literacy programme, teaching adults to read and write. So I called ALTA and got the time and location of registration.

I was afraid to go so I told my friend 'Ten Cents', "I am going to ALTA to learn how to read and spell well". He said, "I was going to ALTA class at a time but stop". I asked him if he would consider going with me to the class. "We can help each other learn the work". He said yes. I felt better about going to register. That day, the teacher put my friend and me in Level 1. The teacher was nice to us. She said this was the first step. I felt good inside. "Very good," I told myself.

Level 1 was good. I was learning to spell the days of the week, the months and I was doing well. I passed Level 1. I continued to improve in reading but not as well in spelling but I was not giving up on it. Level 2 was not easy with more reading and spelling to do. This ALTA class was a very good thing. I was doing well. Now, I am in Level 3 and still trying my best to keep up with the class. I know if I keep studying my phonic cards, reading and writing more, as my teachers say, I can pass Level 3 as well.

Now, I am able to read storybooks to my son and help my daughter with her homework. I can actually send some letters on my phone to my wife and know that the words are correct. My life has changed a lot. Thank God for ALTA. I can now read my own mail and fill out forms. Now I know what my life was missing. I will not let my son and daughter waste their education, like me. I will help them the best I can. I thank ALTA for this. I love being able to read and spell.

was cool – there was nothing to read and no one to ask how to spell anything. Years went by and I had gotten a new job. In this new work place my nightmare became a reality – there was always something to be read. Most times I worked around that – "no scene" (not a problem) – but the real problem was that you needed some kind of qualification to get any bigger post in this establishment

One day on the TV I heard about ALTA classes. I thought about it for some time until one day I told my mother and asked her what she thought about it. "Go for it," she said. When I went to register I was the youngest person in the room. In my mind I said, "Here we go again." I started classes and I became more confident in trying to read and spell. I still haven't told my best friend anything about where I go on a Tuesday and Thursday. I hope one day in the future I will be able to help him to spell something. Until then I will continue to walk alone.

Mother & Daughter at ALTA

Tina Lalman, Level 3, Chaguanas (Mother)

I was born in Guyana in a small village called Parika in the county of Essequibo. My childhood is not something that I like to remember, or even talk about, because it was the saddest part of my life.

As I sit to write now it took me down memory lane and I can't stop the tears from flowing. It all began when I was one year old. My mother and father were separated. So first of all I did not know my mother. I was raised by my father who never talked about my mother.

As a child I had to be anywhere my father was along with my other siblings, two sisters and one brother. His job took him to different parts of the country as he was a government officer responsible for the forest wardens. As he was being transferred to different locations, I attend five different schools. When it came to school homework my father never had the time to help me because of his extravagant night life. Teachers were not willing to go the extra mile with me. I always felt like the one left behind. Somehow I managed to reach standard four, but I still could not read and write properly. Then another disaster struck! My father suddenly died. That is when my real nightmare began. I felt all alone.

I managed somehow along the rocky road of life into adulthood. Then one day I met a young man and I soon realised that is the person I would like for my life companion. So we got married soon after, that was 22 years ago.

My husband was a good provider for our home. I never had to worry about anything again as he had his own business, which was a very big one and that was doing really well. I got my first child and we were indeed a happy family. Business was going okay until the economic problems in the country start to affect our business. In the end our business went bankrupt, and we lost everything, even our home. My husband got frustrated and decided not to continue in Guyana.

Then one day my husband came home and told me that he is going to Trinidad and that I should dispose of all the things in our home. So he left ahead of us. After a few weeks we left for Trinidad. It was hard to start a new life in a strange country.

I got a job and made new friends. They were very good to me and my family. I love the people and the country as they made me feel at home. It was very encouraging because there were many opportunities and so many things for you to empower yourself.

Six years ago I joined the YTEPP programme and loved it. I stayed for over two years in the programme. While I was there my YTEPP teacher recognised that I had a pronunciation problem and told me about the ALTA programme. I went and enquired about the programme and realised that it could help me. So I told my daughter about it and we both joined the programme, we did the assessment and were placed in Level 2. Sometimes it feels strange to be in a class with my daughter and studying together. However we always had a good relationship so we were comfortable with each other studying together.

Now we are in Level 3. Sometimes it seems hard, but I cannot give up because giving up is a sign of weakness. I said to myself that I found a class that I could fit into and feel comfortable about myself. So now I am more determined to move on. Now I can read and understand what I am reading. I would encourage any person who can't read and write to come to ALTA because they have good teachers and a good programme.

Norilla Orford, Level 3, Chaguanas (Daughter)

I was born in Georgetown the capital city of Guyana. I was a very happy little girl. My father was well off so I got everything I wanted. I never had to worry about anything. I went to a very good pre-school and then primary school.

I then left Guyana and came to Trinidad for a holiday. I stayed with my aunt during my holiday, went back home to my family. It was good for a while until the economy went down. Everything got expensive and my father's business went bankrupt.

So I left Guyana and came to Trinidad. It was very hard for us to start over a new life, and it got harder because I could not get into a school and my parents could not afford to send me to a private school. So I was out of school for a few years and when I did get into a school I was the oldest in the class and I did not want anyone to know I could not cope.

So my mum and I talked about it and I left school. My mum told me about ALTA and so we joined the class. We started at Level 2 and I found class to be very good. I learned a lot as the teachers were very nice and they worked along with us if we did not understand. Now my mum and I are in Level 3 and if we can do it, anyone can do it. I now have the confidence to do more. Now I can accomplish anything I put my mind to, thanks to ALTA.



Student Portraits



June Ross *ALTA Student and Artisan*

by Deborah Dowlath

June Ross originally hails from Laventille in Port of Spain. After completing her education at Eastern

Girls Government School, she attended Servol where she studied welding as well as straightening and painting. As a woman in the 1970s, she was used to doing all the hard work, and was not well compensated. Consequently, June asked God to bless her hands so that she could put food on her table. One day while walking down the road she noticed a man carving a grasshopper out of wood, and asked him how he did it. He invited her to come the next day and he would teach her what to do. Thus began her journey into the art of carving.

June was invited to join the Cottage Industries programme which was set up by the then government, to continue to learn and practice this skill. The government then changed and the programme was discontinued. June was a bit perturbed and together with a few friends she lobbied to have the programme restarted. It was eventually re-established as the Export Centre Company Ltd. and June was employed to carve pieces which were exported to various parts of the world. The government changed again and the industries were finally shut down. This however, spurred June on to begin carving for herself creating new pieces each time.

For June, carving is a spiritual experience. She views it as a gift from God and receives guidance from Him. She does not make carvings that people demand her to, but carves images that come to her mind as she is inspired by God. On average, one piece takes approximately 3 months to complete. Her prices vary, depending on the time taken to produce each piece of work, and the type of material used. She uses various types of wood for her carvings but enjoys working mahogany best.

Some of June's work is displayed at the Point Fortin Public Library for African Heritage month.

Her busiest time is during the Carnival season, since most of her business comes from the tourists who visit our shores. She always strives to excel since her competitors in this business are mainly men. In addition to carving, she also makes jewellery using indigenous materials such as pommecythere seeds, coconuts, "banga" seeds, palm seeds, cashew seeds and "donkey eyes".

When June met her husband, Leon from Point Fortin, he was drafted in to join her in the carving business. After June carves the pieces, Leon sands them and June puts on the finishing touches. Leon attended Cap de Ville Government School, but he did not complete his primary school education. He went on to learn fabrication, but never learnt to read. June encouraged him to join the ALTA programme so that he would become literate. She decided to attend the classes as well, so that he would be motivated to attend. Leon is currently a student at the Beginner's Level, while June is repeating Level 2 at the ALTA class held at the Point Fortin Public Library.

June recognises the importance of literacy in the expansion of her business as a wood carver. She hopes to create an online market for her goods in the near future. When orders are made, Leon must be able to read and interpret the orders if she is not around. She is very enthusiastic about attending the computer literacy course that ALTA has promised to introduce in South Trinidad, so that she can develop her computer skills.

Upon completion of this interview, June offered her ALTA tutors jewellery, and refused to accept payment for it. Her explanation: "Oh please, I cannot take money for that! Can I pay ALTA for all it has done for me?"



Lovena Gokool *Literacy for Life*

by Rhea-Simone Augustine

My mother died when I was six and things were tough because my dad had sold the land to take care of her. There were 14 of us and my dad did the best he could. When he could afford it, he would send us to school. On those days he would carry us to the standpipe with a bucket and cloth and wash and dry us. He would iron our uniforms with an iron heated over a coalpot.

My father was unable to read. We lived in Rio Claro and our relatives lived in the village of Penal. Whenever he could get the transport, he took us to visit our relatives. Along the way he looked for school signs, police station signs, church signs and landmarks. That is how he taught us when we travelled as children. That is what I had to take me through, until ALTA. Whatever my father had he gave to us. If he only had 1 pound of flour he made a "sugar bake" and made sure that everybody ate while he drank only a cup of water and went to bed hungry. Just making sure that we all ate was enough for him. My sense of responsibility to family came from my father.

God can walk on all crooked lines. He walked on mine, taking me to ALTA. Not having a clue about ALTA, he directed my path to the library. I was working as a cleaner in a bank but could not be made permanent because I had no school leaving certificate. I was attempting to enrol in a plumbing class when I went to the Arima Library instead of the Arima Government Secondary School. The library security guard asked me if I had come for ALTA. I asked, "What is ALTA?" She advised me to go to the door and see for myself. That was God walking on my crooked lines, the opening up of my whole new world with ALTA.

Finding ALTA is like finding a diamond. I felt ashamed at the first moment entering the class. It did not last very long. After the ALTA introductions I felt much better because everyone was in the same boat, we were there to do better for ourselves. We became a family, the ALTA family, encouraging and sharing. We had to get beyond the pride. Now we meet each other on the streets and talk.

Going to ALTA meant that I was away from home for longer periods, but my family adjusted to it early because they wanted betterment for me. My family was proud to know that I could read big words like 'picturesque'. They made silly jokes by saying, "Watch your language around Mom because

she could speak proper English now." When I wrote short forms like 'Mr.' and 'Rd.', they were amazed. They were shocked and surprised when I wrote my own grocery list without help. This meant that my husband and children had more free time to themselves since I could do these things for myself.

Before ALTA, when my husband and I attended marriage encounter weekends and everyone was taking notes at the dialogue sessions, I scribbled on the page so people would not know that I couldn't write. I moved the pen across the page writing the letters of the alphabet over and over. After the dialogue, when I met to share with my husband, I told him all that I wanted to write but never wrote down.

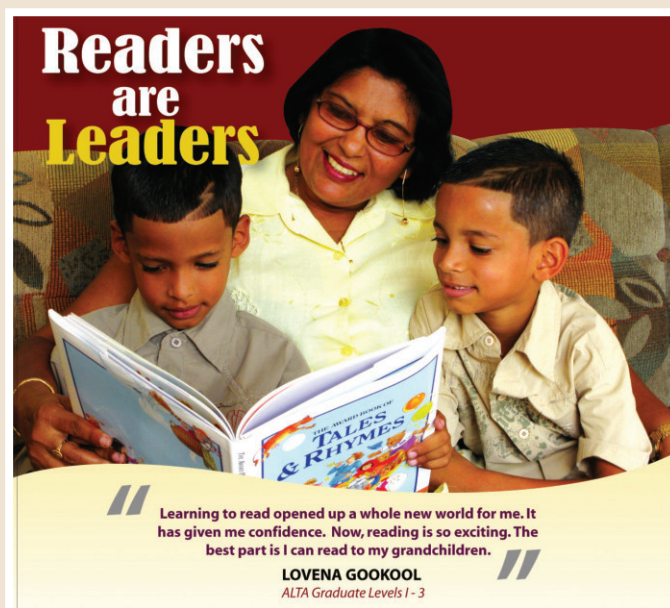
My husband sponsored me as an ALTA student in my Level 3 year. My husband saw what ALTA did for me and he wanted to give back to ALTA. In my letter to my sponsor-husband I thanked him for being there for me through the years. I thanked him for how he coped with me through God, how he stayed with me throughout my struggle with literacy. After 17 years of marriage, I was finally able to let him know in writing that I appreciated him being my husband. In that letter there were no spelling errors. He laminated the letter and has kept it safe. He says he will read it as part of the eulogy if I pass away before him.

I had never received a certificate before attending ALTA. Now I have Level 1, Level 2 and Level 3 certificates. To me, these certificates are like having a university degree. Each time I completed an ALTA level my family hosted the celebrations. And all tutors and students attended. The whole family was always present and there were always tears and laughter.

I am not ashamed to go public. When my three children were growing up I couldn't read fluently to them. Now I can read to my grandchildren. I couldn't put notes in my children's lunch kits. Now I write five notes on the weekends for my grandchildren, one note a day. There is no need to ask anyone to help me fill out forms. I can do it on my own now. I always wondered how people knew how to do these things.

I want to continue my education. I want to do CXC (High School diploma). I would like the opportunity to go to ALTA classes and share with the students a bit. I want to talk directly to them so that they will stay in class. I want to sponsor a student to ALTA classes, just like my husband sponsored me.

Learning to read opened up a whole new world for me. It has given me confidence. Reading is so exciting. The best part is I can read to my grandchildren. I could not wait for them to come out of the womb to start reading to them.



Patsy Antoine *My Life Story*

as told to Noreen de La Rosa

From baby I couldn't see and when I reach five years my mother take me to school and they give me a test to find out how much I know. I couldn't see anything on the board. They told my mother to take me to the doctor. My mother take me back home and never attend to my eyes.

For the next 12 years I was inside the house doing nothing. During the day when I want to look out the window I will put my hand over my eyes and peep out to see what I can see. The glare used to humbug my eyes. My family had me down as Cinderella in the house and I never went outside.

Then my godmother quarrelled with my family to take me to see about my eyes. Is then my mother take me to see a specialist and he told my mother I have cataract in my both eyes and to take me to the hospital clinic.

Reaching the hospital I felt lost. I didn't know anything. They take me to test my eyes. For six years I attended clinic and I had three operations on one eye and four on the other.

Now I can see much better. I thank the Lord for this.

Life began with me after 18 years. I started to move around for the first time. I met a friend and we went around for a few years and then I had a baby at 25. When my son had two years, I got a job with a family making red mango. I work with them for many years to help myself and my son.

Now that I start working, people start to insult me calling me names because they find out I couldn't read and write. I couldn't sign my name. My boss used to sign my pay slip for me.

Then my sister told me about ALTA class. I was happy to go. When I went and join I couldn't do anything in the book. I started in Beginners class tracing the alphabet, learning sounds and signing my name. I now started to meet people on my way to class. I am now finishing in Level 2 after six years.

ALTA has been everything to me. ALTA taught me to read and write and to associate with people. All my life the only school I know is ALTA.

It has made me proud of myself. I have become somebody now. Before ALTA I use to feel empty with no friends and nowhere to go. I would like to tell others like me, "Do not give up hope. It always have a way out there for you. Life is a challenge and we have to fight."



PHOTO: MARK LYNDERSAY

Susan Clarke *A Changed Life*

by Erlene Andrews

Susan Clarke knew for sure that her life had changed when the taxi she was in drove by Stephen Low's Variety Store on Henry Street, Port of Spain.

"All I used to make out was 'Low,'" Clarke says about the previous times she encountered the store. "After I did the ALTA classes, one day I passed the sign and I casually sat there in the car and I said, 'That's Stephen Low'. When I reached down by the National Lottery Board I realised, 'Oh my God, I don't believe it! That's Stephen Low!' I would hear about that store all the time and I never knew that that first word was 'Stephen.'"

Clarke is telling her tale in an office at the Belmont headquarters of the Adult Literacy Tutors' Association (ALTA), the organisation that helped lead her to 'Stephen'. The remembered joy and awe in her face and voice are heart-warming but also heart-rending. For much of her adult life, the simple pleasure that comes with the written word had been denied Clarke.

A resident of Morvant, she was 15 years old when her mother died from breast cancer. Shortly afterward her dad became sick. He died of a stroke when she was 17, leaving her with sole responsibility for her four younger brothers and one sister. But the disruption of Clarke's education began long before this. Her parents had marital problems and her mom would often

confide in her eldest child, probably not realising the effect this would have on the girl and her performance in school.

"When people figure I reading in school, I busy taking on my parents' problems," says Clarke. "When the teacher teaching on board, I not picking up anything. Nobody ever really notice that. I just went through primary school. I didn't pass Common Entrance. Nobody really take the time to find out if I had a problem."

After she failed her Common Entrance Examination,

Clarke's aunt paid for her tuition at a commercial school. Unable to cope with the work, Clarke eventually dropped out. "By that time the problems were worse," says Clarke. "I was getting older. I am more frustrated because I'm a big girl now, I should have a certain amount of understanding."

Eventually Clarke did a catering course that allowed her to have a regular source of income. By the time she hit her 20s, Clarke had a daughter to take care of, as well as her siblings.

In her mid-twenties, with most of the children out of school, Clarke thought about taking another stab at education. But something held her back. Her brothers and sister were young adults without stable jobs. Someone had to make sure there was always food on the table. At 34, Clarke thought again about taking the step into literacy and put it off. She did the same at 35 and 36. Just before she turned 37, Clarke saw a TV show which talked about the ALTA programme. She made up her mind then.

"I say – OK, I will take the chance and I will go to ALTA," says Clarke.

For all her procrastination, when Clarke decided to do the ALTA classes she was very diligent. She travelled from Morvant to an evening class in Woodbrook Secondary because that was the nearest one available when she signed up. In the two years it took Clarke to become a competent reader and writer, the only day she missed was due to her brother's illness.

Clarke has before her access to avenues that were previously closed. Now that she can handle reading texts and doing written assignments, she intends to take a course in geriatric nursing. Now that she can fill out forms, she intends to travel. She plans to try her hand at some CXC subjects.

Clarke, at 38, is an attractive, confident, articulate woman. It's hard to believe that once she was nervous about entering a literacy class on the first day. "When I reach by the door and I see how many people in the classroom I wanted to die because I say, 'Oh Gosh, all these people would know about my problem. I can't take this.'"

Clarke says her tutors put her at ease and her "hunger for education" took over. She can put her pre-Stephen days behind her. "It was really hard and depressing," she remembers. "You would get frustrated every time you see a street sign you're not familiar with. You know, day by day... that is a constant torture."

8 EXPRESS WOMAN



Former ALTA student
Susan Clarke
Photo: STEVE MCPHIE



The First Grader

In celebration of its 20th anniversary, ALTA students viewed the acclaimed National Geographic film 'The First Grader'. The film is set in Kenya and is based on the true story of Maruge, an 84-year-old former Mau Mau fighter who attends primary school to learn to read and write, despite protests from his village. A specially designed lesson meant that 'The First Grader' became a springboard for students to write about their own journey to reading and writing. Out of several hundred submissions, we have selected a few to feature in this section.

LEVEL 1

Gordon Lewis

When I first came to ALTA class I could not read. I decided to do my best. The first term in ALTA class, my teacher see a great improvement in my writing and reading. I feel so great to know that I am improving. So my second term in ALTA class my intention is to do better than last term.

For me, education is the key to liberty.

Education is the key to success. Why? Because without education you can't read and write. You can't help your kids with their school work and you can't fill out application forms for a job. Education is so important in our life, we don't know it until it is too late. So who don't have education need to start all over. So kids, take your education serious or else later on in life you will "ketch real hell".

Meena Balkaran

The power is in the pen. I believe this statement. It can mean once you are literate, you can attain a good job. In that way you can help yourself financially and also live a high standard of living. Additionally for me education is the "key to liberty" because in a democratic society we will be able to work for what we want and this freedom of choice will increase, slavery would not exist and

we will be able to upgrade to the upper class.

Agnes Pierre Morales

The movie was very exciting to me. I see Maruge in me because just like him I did not know to read or write. I did not go to school because where I live was too far from school.

When I look at the things Maruge go through it touch my heart. When I see what happen to him but he did not give up. Like Maruge I too lost my husband in death when he was shot by bandits when they stormed the compound where he was working as a security officer. When I was informed of his death I was devastated by this. Now I am left alone to take care of myself and my daughter. That was a job cut out for me so I had to pick the pieces up and go on with my life.

So when I see 84-year-old Maruge go to school with little children, it give me more strength to keep going to my ALTA classes. So I will keep trying and I will not let anyone tell me that I can't but I will let them know I can do it.

LEVEL 2

Rosanna Bailey

Reading and writing has always been a problem for me. Just like Maruge could not read his letters from the president, when I get

letters I don't understand certain words and have trouble with writing letters. When I went to school, I felt like I was a slow learner. Not knowing the value of education, I did not push myself enough. Coming from a large family of 13, my parents were poor. We lived in the country in Four Roads, Tamana and our surroundings was citrus, cocoa and coffee where I worked hard as a young child. My father was real sick and could no longer work so we had to work even harder.

I left school in post primary and proceeded to work in many places. There I learnt much more about life and education through these experiences. However after I had my children, I realised that helping them with their homework was a problem for me at a certain level.

In 1990 I began attending ALTA classes. However I could not continue as I had to work and look after my family. Today I can say that I have overcome that obstacle, as I have returned to finish what I have started 22 years ago. My children are all grown up and I am no longer working.

Reading and writing are important to me so I can read books, newspapers, signs and even write letters. Having to overcome many obstacles in my life, I believe it is still not too late for me. Like Maruge said "you are never too old to learn". There is no place in this world for someone without a good education, because education is the key to success.



Level 3

Tara Sebro

'The power is in the pen' - this is a quote I believe is so true. The pen is used to express what one is thinking or what they would like done. Words are sometimes treated like the wind that no one remembers. The ink of a pen makes a decision more permanent. With just the stroke of a pen someone can be hanged, individuals can be hired or fired, the knowledge of the past could stay unknown and your past could be forgotten.

Having the power of the pen set laws in place that have helped in curbing the crime in countries all over the world. At present it has helped me a great deal. I am now aware of the problems I have with reading, spelling, the ability to read and not pronounce the 's' at the end of words and not being able to notice the difference where homophones are included.

Now that I have joined ALTA I can use what I have learnt to pass it on to my children. It has also assisted me at my work place where I am more prepared for a lot of situations that I was unsure about. Now I can assist others. With ALTA I am no longer ashamed to admit my disability. I have further reiterated that "the power is in the pen".

Allison Lutchman

Maruge was a good example for the people in the world to realize you are never too old to learn. My experience in life is, education is the key to liberty. I am an adult. The education ALTA is giving to me means a lot in my life. It made me realize I can go the distance.

I never thought I would have been able to learn at the age I was when I started with ALTA. I said to myself, "but I want to educate myself." I was determined. I am amazed with how the programmes are. I said to myself, "I went to school as a kid

Antoinette Browne

At times I feel like I am going nowhere. It has been three years since I have been going to these classes and I feel like I am not moving forward. Although sometimes I am able to read the words on my own, yet at times I still forget what I learnt. Other obstacles I face are remembering phonics, pronouncing words and not always having self confidence to overcome these obstacles. I chose to be determined and never give up.

Carol Westfield

I would like to read, write and understand any and everything. Why? Because like Maruge I received my letter on the 25th July 2007. I see and take care of my letter everyday. I have a letter to read. My letter was given to me by my daughter who is hearing impaired, who I was unable to help when she was going to school. Now she has given me a letter in human form. Unlike Maruge I have a grandson to teach. My grandson is also hearing impaired, so that's why I have decided to attend the ALTA class.

Simone Yorrick

Maruge changed his goal of reading the letter on his own. He said it was taking too long, but Maruge never stopped learning how to read. He was pretty open about wanting to learn to read. For me to be open about my reading problems is hard. In 1992, I found out I have dyslexia. Dyslexia is when you mix up words with other words, letter with other letters and writing letters back to front. The hardest thing for me is to say what I am seeing. It's getting better but I have to try harder.

Maruge said "You are never too old to learn" and "The power is in the pen." I also believe this. Many obstacles have come my way but I overcame them. I have to try ten times harder than someone without dyslexia. Reading is something I love but it takes me months to just read one book. I am the parent of two wonderful children and both of them can read well. They sometimes help me with my reading. It's embarrassing for me, but they always say, "Mummy, we will help you!" Maruge was never embarrassed or too proud to get help. Maybe I can take a page from Maruge. One step towards being like him is attending ALTA classes regularly. I have learnt so much from ALTA, and will continue to do so. I am very thankful to all the teachers from ALTA who have taken the time to help me learn how to read.

but did not learn as much as I did." I am happy ALTA is free for adults, so I was able to attend ALTA classes. I am a different person where it concerns my education now. It motivates me and made me go out there for more education. I was able to advance myself, be braver when I speak, use computers, do TV production and communicate better with my clients. I am still going for more. I will never stop educating myself. I speak to myself daily saying, "I will keep educating myself for as long as my brain is functioning." I will not give up. 100% is being taught to me and I learn 50%. Another time I will be determined to do the other 50% until I get it right and to educate myself.

I believe now, you are never too old to learn, and for me, education is the key to liberty. I am proud to tell my friends and adults "it is not hard as we adults thought it would be. As long as we are determined, we can educate ourselves." I thank ALTA for giving me and others this free education.

Shennel

You are never too old to learn. Everyone learns and understands things in their own way and in their own time. Some people are slow learners and others had to deal with war, religion, racism and class. There are many people going back to school from young adults to much older people. By attending evening classes, taking a course or going to university to study for a degree people try to get a better paying position in their job. Most aged people join classes so that they can stay active, keep their minds fresh or just to be around people like themselves.

Life is a learning process whether you attend school or not. School can only teach you the basics in life. You are always learning something new everyday. People make other people feel bad about their learning disabilities but history has shown us that there have been many people in history that were not well educated but were leaders of a country, big business people, good athletes and actors. These people had learning problems but that did not stop them from becoming successful.

So even if you are in your 80's, 90's or any age you have the right to an education and today, more than ever, there are resources available to help you with whatever it is you want to learn about. Don't sit and think about it. Don't put it off or wait for tomorrow. Take the time today to learn about whatever it is that interests you.

Indar Poliah

At age 26 I got married and some time later my wife realised that I could not read and write. One day at work my wife called me and said to me that she saw on the internet that ALTA is giving classes to persons who had to leave school at an early age. I was now 45 years old and decided to start the ALTA classes and found it to be helping me to read and write. I started in Level 2 and now I am in Level 3. Now at my work I can write reports with confidence, and also take notes in meetings. I am in management. What I have learnt at ALTA has helped me improve my skills.

Now with renewed confidence I decided to do a computer course at U.W.I. As a result the company bought me a laptop so I can write my reports. As you can see it is "never too old to learn".

Oldest Male Student: 89-year-old Ramdass Sooklal



Mr. Sooklal is the oldest male ALTA student and three of his daughters are current ALTA tutors. He attended the screening of "The First Grader" which

Mr. Ramdass Sooklal reading his journey to literacy at Bocas Lit Fest 2012. He is supported by two of his ALTA tutor daughters

was a feature event at the NGC Bocas Lit Fest. Bocas Lit is an annual celebration of books, writing and writers. At this event Mr. Sooklal, supported by two daughters, read the account he wrote of his journey to literacy inspired by the film. When he finished reading the audience erupted into loud applause with several persons coming forward to commend him.

Here is what he wrote:

I am Ramdass Sooklal. At the age of 88 years I went back to school. My lovely daughter encouraged me to sign up to a reading and writing course called ALTA. So like Maruge, I wanted to learn to read and write better.

Maruge was firmly resolved to go back to school and learn to read. His motivation was his desire to read a very important letter he received from the president. So with persistence, he struggled to accomplish his goals. Nothing prevented this great man from achieving his purpose. My eagerness to attend ALTA class stems from my passion for the Bible. The ALTA class helped me improve my reading and writing skill so in turn reading the Bible become more enjoyable because I could better understand it. Watching the movie about Maruge inspired and stirred a desire in me to never give up or take for things for granted.

The reasons why I was not able to complete my primary school education at the time was because on my way home from school one day a stray dog bit and

The First Grader

grasped my ankle, seriously damaging it. It took 3 years to fully recover from my injury. During my recovery period my father the bread winner in the home fell ill. I was then informed by my mother that my brother and I will take up the mantle of providing for the household. So my opportunity of a proper education was dashed away from me.

Later on in life I got a job as a bus conductor and that boosted up my knowledge as I had to write down information like names and routes. I had to ask the drivers and inspectors how to spell their names and other information. I also later owned and ran a small grocery where my wife, who had more knowledge than me about reading and writing, helped me a bit.

As a father I try to instil the importance of a proper education to children. My children willingly take my advice. Today, as a result of my hard work, ensuring that my 8 children get a proper education, I am proud to say that they are doing well. I too, as a result of my ALTA class, am reading and writing much better at 89.

Oldest Female Student: 86-year-old Theresa Stanislaus by Marilyn Rampersad-Talma

Theresa Stanislaus was born in Grenada on 7th July 1926. She is the eldest of 15 children and did not complete primary school. Her mother was a vendor in the market so Theresa was told she had to take care of her brothers and sisters. It was normal for the eldest child to stay at home to help look after younger siblings. When I enquired about her father, the silence told me not to ask any more about him.

Theresa got married and had two children, two handsome grown men she proudly claims. When she was 31 years old she left her husband and Grenada and came to Trinidad saying that "he was too wild". She later sent for the two boys who joined her in Trinidad. Theresa also mentioned that her husband could only read and write a little. Her family in Trinidad, in particular her brother, assisted her in taking care of her two boys. Later she met a Trini man and married a second time. Her Trini husband died of a heart attack and Theresa says that he was very good to her, even helping her at times to write and read. She said he never threw it in her face that she was not so good in reading and writing. When asked if men in Grenada are different from the ones in Trinidad, Theresa said, "Miss, you really want me to answer that?"

All her brothers and sisters had a basic education and can get

by, but throughout her life, Theresa said she felt she was not somebody if she couldn't read and write. Her interjection was to remind me that not everybody's life is the same.

Theresa's good friend and neighbour, Maizen Wickam told her about the ALTA Chaguanas morning class and encouraged Theresa to join. Theresa joined the ALTA morning class in 1999 where she was assessed and placed in a Level 1 class with Maizen. Theresa is now in Level 2. Her sons, while not discouraging her, did say to her that she is too old to learn. In her wisdom, she replied, "all yuh have your education, give me a chance!" She is regular in her church and is so happy that she can now read parts of the Bible.

About her experience in the ALTA class, Theresa says, "I feel good because I see for myself that I can read better." Her writing, she admitted, is slow but that is because of the arthritic pain in her hands. She advises without my prompting that to live a happy, healthy life you have to learn to read because it is the best thing you can get and "I taking mine to the grave with me!"

Theresa's skin is soft and there are no signs of wrinkles unless

you lean close to hear when her voice drops, or she leans in asking for a repeat of the question. Provision, fish and fish broth are her favourite foods. And while her favourite colour is pink, today she is wearing a lovely brown dress. When I enquired about the hat she is always wearing, she says when you young you do foolish things, now she's paying for that!

Being 86 years old with body pains

from old age, high blood pressure and heart complications rarely prevents her from attending class. Maizen's new husband has a car so Theresa does not have to worry about transport. She even attended the screening of "The First Grader"! William Munroe of Caribbean Prestige Foundation is her brother and he is insisting that she leaves Central and live in San Juan where she can get better care. She too insists that she is not leaving Central, no matter how many other ALTA classes they have across the country. As we end our talk, Theresa bends to retrieve her walking stick that during the talk fell on the floor of the Chaguanas library. She stops me from collecting it and when she straightens up, she smiles and says to me, "Miss, I want to write a book!"





ALTA Student Faces the Cameras: Vincent Valentine

Interviewer: Suzanne Dowdy

Trinity Broadcasting, 24 August 2011

Vincent, tell us your story.

Well I join the ALTA course last year through Miss Romany. She is an ALTA teacher from Maraval, and she told me about the ALTA. I'm very happy to be here this morning. I learn plenty from the ALTA, like reading, spelling, writing, even the phonics. ALTA teach phonics to pronounce a word. If you see letter 't' you say /t/, for p you say /p/. The basics – I learn that from ALTA and today I could read and write and spell.

And how old are you?

I'm 47.

And you joined the ALTA course just a year ago?

Just one year.

Well let's go back a little bit. At what stage did you leave school?

I used to live in South, and I leave school at Form One. And I come to Maraval and I really never get myself back into school.

So all this time, from the time you left Form 1 to a year ago, you couldn't read or write at all?

At all.

Not even a couple of words or anything?

Well I knew a li'l one or two.

What did you do after you left Form 1. What kind of work were you doing?

Well, I come and do agriculture, gardening, planting in Maraval. And now I doing my li'l ice cream business, home made ice cream in Maraval.

I'm thinking of what the frustration must be.

Well, it was a li'l pressure. Sometimes you get a form to fill out and you cannot fill it out and you have to leave with the form to go home to get help. But as I going through the ALTA school, I could fill out a form now on my own. Once when I passing in a taxi, I watch a word and remember what I learn in the phonics and I could pronounce the word. Like Pen-ta, you could break it down into syllables. Thanks to ALTA again for helping me. I'm still going through it. I'm looking for... like passes. I'm not giving up. And I would like to say that those who need help in reading and writing and spelling, you could go to the ALTA and register. Don't be ashamed, there's nothing to be ashamed of. That's why I'm here this morning to show how much I learn from ALTA.

Tell us about the first day that you went to ALTA.

Well, the first day I went to ALTA I was nervous. Miss Romany from Maraval, an ALTA teacher, she took me upstairs by myself and she give me a rundown on some words and she notice that I know some and I do not know some. She put me in Level One which is my teacher here Marlene, and she's a very good teacher. She teach very good you know and she teach you how to use the VC/CV rule to break down words into syllables. This is the cards we use in class. (Shows phonics and sight word cards.) These with words – the sight words – you watch the word on the card, read the word. Once you

go home and practise, these are the same words the teachers will give you in sentence. This is some of the phonics – so that for i, you say ink /i/ iron /i/. We have this one here, rat /r/. This is the simple things that you learn and once you use these things, a word will actually come easy to you. Bat /b/ you use your lips. Sun /s/, rose /z/ – between your teeth. This is all the phonics here. They give you phonics after phonics, every day you get phonics.

So is there anything we need to add to this that might be helpful to people?

Well yes. I always tell anybody interested in the ALTA to come and join. All those who don't have a li'l education who want to learn to read and write, I'll still give them the number to call or you could go down to Belmont Circular, Port of Spain and don't be ashamed cause it's nothing to be ashamed of. It's for you and for you to learn and you could help your children also. You can see here that in one year (shows ALTA certificate) I get a certificate in one year, which is to show that I improve with the ALTA and I plan to go on and on until I get to be a teacher or something.

Are you able to pick up a newspaper now?

I buying newspapers every day, morning and evening. Even self you can't read it, I don't rush the reading. I take meh time and say it out and I actually know it, how to read. I mightn't be at the highest point, but I will get there. And I going for more of this (shows certificate) and passes.

ALTA Impact Survey 2001-2011

by **Andrew Hosein**, BSc. Economics UWI, MSc Development Statistics, SALISES UWI Andrew Hosein has over five years' experience conducting social and economic research for local, international and multilateral organizations.

Summary

In 2012 ALTA undertook a tracer study to determine the impact that the programme has had on its students. The study sought responses from students who attended ALTA classes during the period 2001 to 2011. During June and July ALTA volunteers conducted telephone interviews to complete 189 questionnaires.

The study showed that the majority of past students strongly agreed that the service provided by ALTA was beneficial to them, not only in the expected ways of increasing their ability to read and write (48%), but also in secondary ways, like boosting their self-confidence and self-esteem (41% strongly agreed), and helping them to earn higher salaries after they completed the programme (52% strongly agreed). On average, persons saw an increase of 32% in their salary after completing the programme. Specifically, many participants said that they are much happier now since they can do things for themselves, like reading the newspaper, reading in church, completing forms and helping their children/grandchildren with school work.

86% of survey participants achieved the expectation that they had when they first enrolled in the programme. This rate is even more noteworthy since more than half of those surveyed entered the programme at Level 1 (53%) and 21% started at Beginner Level. Those at the lower literacy levels have more work to do to become readers and writers, so achieving their expectations is more difficult and takes more time. The respondents to the survey praised the ALTA tutors (82% excellent) for their quality of delivery and for providing a comfortable learning environment. The tutors were also responsible for creating their most memorable ALTA experiences (52%). Most survey participants also said that they found it easy to relate to the ALTA workbooks (69%).

100% of the students said that they would recommend ALTA to others.

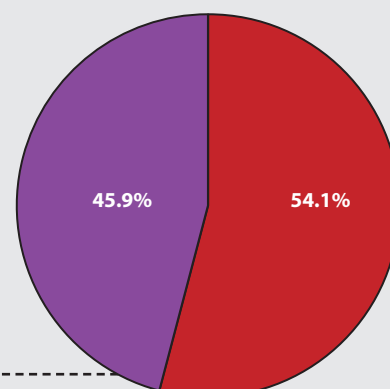
While ALTA received top marks from the respondents, one-third of respondents experienced challenges that interfered with their class attendance. For instance, 19% of persons found it challenging to manage work and classes at the same time which often (35%) led to them dropping out of classes. Other challenges include some sort of family problem (6%), for instance a family member falling ill or having to take care of a child or elderly person for an extended period of time.

Overall it was concluded that the ALTA programme provided significant benefits to all the persons that enrol and especially those who complete the programme. Students agree that the service offering of ALTA meets their needs and it also helps them both economically and socially.

Characteristics of survey participants

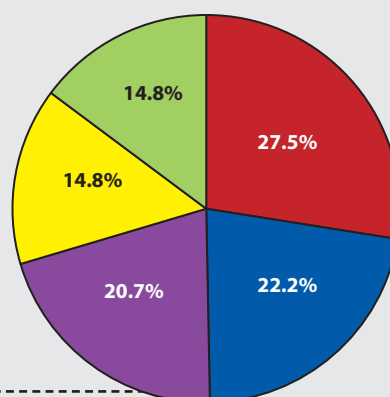
Sex profile: 54% of respondents were female, while 46% were male. This mirrors the profile seen in the ALTA student database (54:46).

Sex	Per cent
Female	54.1
Male	45.9
Total	100.0



Location: The higher proportion of respondents in North (27%) and East (22%) reflects the geographic distribution of students. ALTA South has fewer volunteer tutors, and so fewer classes and students, while North has the highest student population.

Location	Per cent
North	27.5
East	22.2
Central	20.7
South	14.8
West	14.8
Total	100.0



Income: Nearly half of the respondents had incomes of between \$0-\$2500, while 27% earned between \$2,501-\$5,000.

Family members with literacy problems: 62% of respondents have family members who have problems with reading and writing. Of those who have family members with problems reading, 15% are one of their parents, 36% are one of their siblings, and 23% are one of their children.

Considering that many hide their low literacy even from close relatives, this is a very high rate. This reinforces that literacy is influenced by heredity (dyslexia is genetic) and environment. The child from a home where reading and writing are a part of daily life is much more likely to become literate at school, providing a strong case for adult literacy instruction.

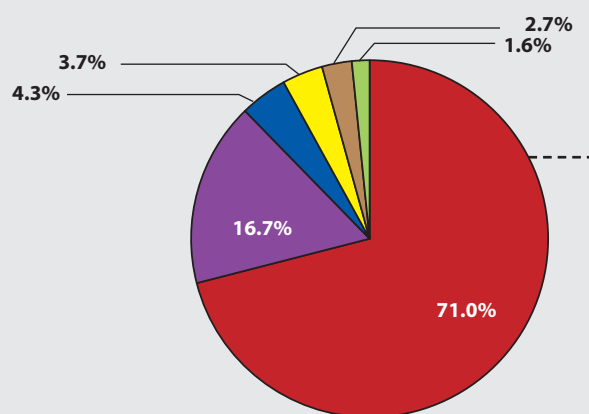
Findings

Drivers for Enrolment

Table 3 shows why students wished to enrol in the ALTA programme. A large majority, 71% of respondents, said they enrolled to learn to read and write, while 17% took a broad view saying that they enrolled to better themselves. Approximately 8% enrolled to improve a specific aspect of literacy: grammar, spelling or writing. Lastly 4% of participants enrolled because they did not attend or did not complete, either primary or secondary school.

Table 3: Reasons Respondents Enrolled in ALTA

Reasons for enrolment	Per cent
To learn to read and write	71.0
To improve self	16.7
Did not attend school	4.3
To improve spelling	3.7
To improve writing	2.7
To improve grammar	1.6
Total	100.0



Challenges

Respondents experienced two types of challenges while attending ALTA classes: internal and external. Internal challenges are those that occur within the programme – 14%

of participants had a challenge with spelling, while 5% had a problem with grammar, 3% with workbook exercises and 1% with the facilities. External challenges experienced were: work (19%), family problems (6%), health problems (6%) and financial problems (2%).

Table 4: Challenges

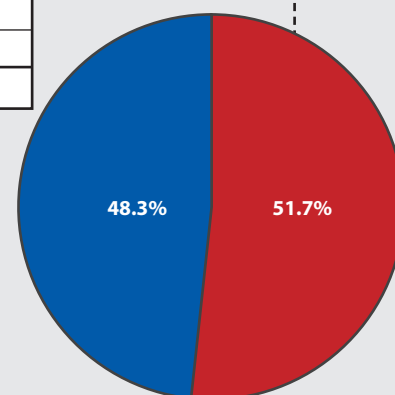
Challenge	Per cent
None	43.3
Internal	
Spelling	14.0
Grammar	4.5
Exercises	3.2
Facilities	1.3
External Work	19.1
Family problems	6.4
Health	5.7
Financial	2.5
Total	100.0

Earnings

Table 5 demonstrates that more than half of the respondents (52%) said that their ALTA experience led to an increase in their salary. For the others (48%), ALTA classes did not improve their salary level.

Table 5: Earnings

Increased Earnings	Per cent
Yes	51.7
No	48.3
Total	100.0



Impact

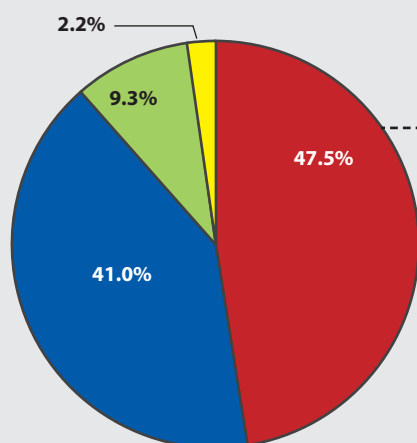
When respondents were asked about the impact of ALTA, 48% said that its greatest positive impact was on their ability to read and write. 41% of participants said that it vastly improved their confidence, while the remainder said that it helped them get a better job and helped them to help their other family members with their school work. It should be noted that although 48% of respondents said that they are

ALTA Impact Survey

able to read and write, it does not mean that the other 52% were not. The other responses are actually secondary effects of their advancement in reading and writing.

Table 6: Impact

Impact	Percent
Able to read and write	47.5
Confidence	41.0
Better employment	9.3
Able to help family members in school	2.2
Total	100.0



Rating

Table 7: Rate – ALTA Programme

ALTA Programme Rating	Per cent
Excellent	76.0
Satisfactory	21.8
Neutral	2.2
Poor	0
Total	100.0

Table 8: Rate – ALTA Tutors

ALTA Tutors	Percent
Excellent	81.6
Satisfactory	18.4
Neutral	0
Total	100.0

Table 9: Rate – ALTA Teaching Materials

ALTA Teaching Materials	Percent
Excellent	68.7
Satisfactory	31.3
Total	100.0

Reading Circle, Life Circle

by Maureen Baldeo

It's not easy for adults to find the time to attend Reading Circle sessions in addition to their twice-weekly classes, so it is significant when they show up rain or shine to a Friday afternoon Reading Circle. At Reading Circles a trained guide works with one to four students to practise the skills learnt in the ALTA class. The focus is on fluency and comprehension.

When I started the Chaguanas Reading Circle three years ago, there were eight learners on roll with wide swings in attendance, which is expected as some use Reading Circle for drop-in help when they miss classes. At the start of each term, I encouraged each to set meaningful work or personal goals and we evaluated these at the end of each term.

After a year we were down to four regulars, each representing a different Reading Circle target group. Patricia was a Level 3 graduate who still had comprehension problems but had an even mightier will to conquer these. The others were current students. Seon was a Level 2 student with sharp comprehension skills but spelling and reading difficulties. Mala showed dyslexic symptoms when tired and this was compounded by classes being at the end of a day and a work week. Isabella had severe headaches and fought to recognise words, even those learnt just the week before. They persisted, and I could not do otherwise.

Students can bring their own reading materials to class but seldom do, so it was up to me to take the lead. I set about finding exciting and varied reading to match each student's tastes, and fun activities to compete with the other options for Fridays. And these were not far away: three malls within walking distance and restaurants with pool tables and video games, one right across from the school. I brought in the daily newspapers, books borrowed from the ALTA library and started a collection of my own of on-sale books, flyers and travel magazines. I added a new spin to activities, often rewarded by remarks like "We never knew that learning sight words could be so much fun" or "I never thought of using phonics like this!"

In 2010 I was fortunate to be one of the ALTA tutors to attend the Visualizing and Verbalizing (V&V) training organized by the Dyslexia Association and funded by Republic Bank. This provided new ways to reach my students who by now were always happy to be a part of my experiments, or so I told myself. From one of the V&V books, I read a sentence for students and started them on the visualizing process. The students really enjoyed this and used their imaginations gleefully. I continued until they had visualized the image of the clown in the four-line paragraph.

The following week, students were eager to continue with the experiment. To my amazement, all remembered more than 75% of what they had visualized. Isabella, who struggled with comprehension, remembered everything about the imaginary clown at a fair. She was also more confident in answering inferential questions. When the students read the paragraph on the clown, their confidence skyrocketed and their reading was very good. This was one of the high points for me and the learners.

Reading Circle training, once a year on the first Saturday in October, is

always useful and inspiring. Through Republic Bank's Power to Make a Difference sponsorship, in 2011 ALTA contracted literacy specialist Wallis Wyke to provide training in the guided reading approach and develop materials for Reading Circles. The materials, which use multiple copies of books in the Reading Circle library, make preparation much easier for the guides and teach a range of comprehension strategies in easy steps.

Snippets of success appear every week. Patricia after two years reminds me from time to time about how little she would understand when reading a paragraph and how she is now able

to summarize key points. Seon now uses 'they' correctly and reads much more fluently, due in large part to his unstinting determination.

Ross, one of our new regulars, along with his dedicated mom Camille, is reading loudly and has moved a long way despite the brain damage he suffered in his early teens. He is no longer shy and jokes with everyone. And when he does not recognise a word, he writes it down without being asked to do so. A few of the Spelling Programme students also come to Reading Circle,

and they learn and help others learn as this is now the established method at our Reading Circle.

Our reading is taking us into the area of technology. My 'Teach Yourself Word Visually' book created quite a stir with two young men who are desperate to learn to use the computer. They read this book without much help and then explain methods to the others in the class. Sometimes they understand things I don't and explain these to me too. Our class

members are keen to go to the public library to use the computers. Before I start experiments in the new school year, I may take them to the library to become members and subsequently computer users.

Over the three years, I have developed an even deeper respect for the class members. Some work very long hours and have home commitments like children and ill parents, but they come faithfully. As more guides join, we are better able to meet all the different needs.

It is with a sense of fulfilment that I view the class which ended the last academic year with four guides and student attendance between four and eight. The reading often becomes so loud, I wonder if persons passing the school marvel that school children are so eager, especially at late evening lessons.

Isidore, Gaston & Gloria get into the act on the Reading Circle trip to Lopinot



Noreen leads students in guided reading at the Belmont Reading Circle





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HEY speak to us and you never know Association. As the organisation approaches its 10th

By JOANNAH BHAROSE

Since 2000 the mother of four decided she had enough of being illiterate and she made a bold move by signing up for free classes with the Adult Literacy Tutors Association (ALTA).

Section 3: ALTA Tutors

Leaving work



Entering a littered school classroom



FACTS & STATS

- Over 2000 tutors trained.
- Over 300 actively teaching in free community classes.
- Process: interview – 8 ALTA lesson observations – 6 days' training – 1 orientation – 3 terms twice-weekly teaching – certificate – eligible for contract work when expert with experience at two levels.

Tutor Roundtable

by Ira Mathur



Marlene Charles

There is something extraordinary about seeing a light come on for somebody who has been trying to pick up a skill and one day they get it. One student said to me, "Miss I was walking in darkness and I am seeing the light." To me that is the reward. It may seem like a small step when a student discovers the value of a vowel in spelling, but the look on his face is priceless.

At ALTA I meet adults with dyslexia grappling with literacy. Undiagnosed dyslexia gives the child an excuse to drop out. That made me realise how the system is failing the children. I taught in the school system for 10 years. I had a first degree in zoology. There are good teachers, but no allowances are made for disability. There were too few remedial teachers. As a result, schools such as Belmont Secondary are dealing with an entire year-group of children who got below 30 percent at SEA. There should be at least one remedial teacher per school. There is also a need to look at the structure. Now there is a push for teachers to get a Bachelor in Education, which is a good thing.

I taught for a while in the UK. One of the things about exposure to world standards is you know when to switch from Creole to Standard English. Using Creole started with radio, the ads started to change, followed by the announcers. Now Creole is accepted and popular. It's tragic that at some point we began to equate our ignorance of Standard English with being 'Trini to the bone.' But if you want a place in this globalised world, you can't get by on 'Trini speak' alone.

There is something extraordinary about seeing a light come on for somebody who has been trying to pick up a skill and one day they get it.

One sunny afternoon earlier this year Ira Mathur visited ALTA's head office and met five ALTA-trained tutors each of whom has a unique perspective on teaching literacy to adults. Surprisingly, the common thread that runs through them all (apart from their desire, as Mahatma Gandhi once expressed, to 'be the change that you wish to see in the world') is that giving voluntarily of their time to ALTA is, in fact, an extraordinary gift of receiving.

Erline Andrews

As a journalist I think it's important that every media house donate to ALTA as there is a natural marriage of journalism and literacy. I'm surprised that more journalists aren't interested in volunteering. Poor grammar is not the problem. It's the symptom. In T&T we didn't develop a safety net. How can we ensure that people who might lack in some small area are not sent down the river? The children of single parents, the older ones who are left at home to take care of babies, the absent fathers.

How do we put systems in place to catch the vulnerable? We don't have that. But by the time they reach ALTA, it's hard for them to catch up with life and fulfil their potential. We have to catch children in a safety net when they are born with disadvantages.

It is important to volunteer, to give back, to be a part of making society better, instead of our habit of continually complaining. Everyone who is able should volunteer. ALTA is perfect for me. I love books, love to read, and can't imagine the despair, what it must be to be without words. It made me feel bad.

There is a prevailing concept in our society that service is beneath you. It's not charity. It's a duty and, in the end, if we help our vulnerable, we all live in a better society.



Ira and tutors in round table discussion. From Left: Erline Andrews, Ira Mathur, Marlene Charles, Deborah O'Neil, Raphael Sookram and Norbert Yaw Ching

Raphael Sookram

I am a public health inspector. Before I joined ALTA I was looking at ways to improve myself. I realised it was all 'me, me, me' and wanted to make a difference in the lives of others. I became a listener on a hotline for lonely, despairing and suicidal people.

It was divine guidance that led me here. I thought I had problems but after listening to people's issues, on poverty, infidelity, marital issues, incest, rape, it made me see how blessed my own life was, how much I was taking for granted.

When I saw the ad for ALTA tutors, I came to the interview. The observation sessions blew me away. It's now been 11 years for me. I started teaching the beginners and stayed for three years. I didn't want to leave as it was wonderful to see the light of understanding come to the lives of people who started off unable to even write the alphabet.

I didn't know I could have such a positive impact. One guy said, "I hear your voice even at home, encouraging me".

I felt like I broke a major barrier when one of my former students, a woman in her late 60's, ran up to me on the street and hugged me saying "I'm so glad to see you". She told me that after leaving ALTA she attended free government classes to study for CXC subjects. To my great surprise, she did English CXC. She didn't just pass – she got a distinction. Her goal when she came here was to be able to read her bible. Now there was a whole new world open to her. What was great was her staying power.

We all need to be a light to others. This experience is unlike any other. It keeps you bubbling.

I didn't know I could have such a positive impact. One guy said, "I hear your voice even at home, encouraging me".

Norbert Yaw Ching

I have been at ALTA for some seven years. My entire career has been in sales and marketing and in that position you correspond with people in different companies. I encountered a lot of bad grammar and had to spend a lot of time deciphering it. It bothered me.

I had a student once who seemed really familiar to me, but I could not figure out why. Weeks later I realised that he was the manager in a company I was dealing with months before and his letters and faxes were always challenging to understand. "These are all professionals." I thought. "If this is how professionals write, how much more is being missed everywhere else?" The more I saw it, the more it bothered me. I thought instead of complaining about it, I should do something about it.

I wanted to contribute to people who might have been more open to learning. I came to ALTA and went through the tutoring process. The eye-opener for me was that I came here thinking of illiteracy as people who can't read or write. I discovered there is illiteracy and literacy and a vast range in-between. I

wondered how teaching methods could be applied to all these levels. It revealed itself over time.

The experience has been truly rewarding. There is a life lesson here. You come here to give, but you get so much in return. We are teaching people from the ages of 16 and over. Many are mature, in their 30's, all the way to their 60's – people with families, jobs, bills, challenges like everyone else and they are living their lives with this 'deficiency'. They've courageously taken the first step towards fixing it.

To do classes at the end of a working day is not easy. The energy and focus require a lot of commitment. It can be hot. It can be noisy outside. But we keep the environment light-hearted; each tutor adapts ALTA's teaching methods to their own style.

We start with a large number of students, which filters down to a core group of determined people who come in every day and do their best. It's not just about teaching. Some ALTA students are here because of poverty or broken families, but too many

are here due to learning disabilities which were never picked up in school.

You witness adults pushing their boundaries, going beyond feelings of shame and trying to fulfil their potential as human beings. It's ultimately a lesson in human courage and determination.

Whatever I have done at ALTA has been given back to me tenfold. As a child I was always told that 'to whom much is given, from him much is expected.' That has stuck. I was fortunate. My parents tried hard to give me a good upbringing and education so I could stand on my own two feet. I was always aware that I didn't get my success alone. So I've always felt I've got to see how I can help others along as I have been helped. I felt that avenue was through ALTA.

We think Creole English makes us who we are. Yes it has its place in our cultural lives, but if we want to compete in the world, we have to speak Standard English.

It's not always rosy. Some days I think, "What am I doing here?" and nearly burst a blood vessel. On other days when you see a light going on in someone, knowledge dawn on them, pride replacing shame, or students who have moved on, coming back to thank you with tears in their eyes, you think, "How can I walk away?"

You witness adults pushing their boundaries, going beyond feelings of shame and trying to fulfil their potential as human beings. It's ultimately a lesson in human courage and determination.

Deborah O'Neil

My best friend died suddenly. She was an ALTA tutor. Two weeks later someone from ALTA called my phone and asked 'are you coming to class?' thinking I was her. I thought it was a sign that this was something I needed to do, to continue where she left off.

I joined ALTA to honour my friend's memory and to give back something to society. Today, I can say it's not about what I give to ALTA, it's about what I GET out of it. It's mind-blowing. I thought I would be giving and never dreamt how much I would receive. For me ALTA is a classroom in the 'University of Lifelong Learning' and I am privileged to be a student there.

I believe literacy plays a great part in keeping crime levels down and that's another reason why I wanted to tutor at ALTA. As part of training to be an ALTA tutor, you have to read mirror writing where you struggle to decode each word – if you can. I felt myself becoming angry. I couldn't read the words. They made no sense.

That exercise was designed to make you feel what a non-reader experiences when he sees a written word and is unable to read it. I felt disquiet and anger – and I understood.

I grew up sitting by my grandmother's side on a little stool reading and learning words. When grown-ups wanted to hide what they were saying, they would spell the words. I would get it immediately and so I thought that this was normal for everyone. I was amazed that grown people were unable to read and spell. However, after doing the tutors' course at ALTA, I realised how much I did not know. I spelled by rote and I knew no rules. The spelling programme gave me even further insight into the rules that govern spelling. For the ALTA student, spelling rules and strategies are an integral part of actively learning to spell.

What makes ALTA dynamic is that the lessons are practical. Paula has addressed one of the major problems in adult literacy programmes – the lack of appropriate reading material. The lessons are relevant and pertinent to everyday affairs; topics are based on various festivals, such as Christmas, Carnival, Eid, and are taught concurrently with the event; life skills such as anger management and parenting and even some lessons in domestic skills such as planting, sewing and cooking are included.

Some people give off a sense of despair, and others, embarrassment and shame, not wanting people to know they are not literate. The men tend to hide and not deal with it. One example is a 20-year-old former student of Chaguanas Senior Secondary. He was dyslexic and could not read. He said he faked it in class. One day to his shame this was discovered in front of the whole class when everyone had to read part of a poem and



Deborah O'Neil teaching the ALTA Programme at to Form 1 students at Union Claxton Bay Secondary School

The joy, the pride, the visible growth in stature that I witness in the students when they have mastered a literacy skill such as filling out a form, writing a receipt or reading an article – things many take for granted – keep me selfishly coming back to ALTA for more.

he couldn't read at all. The teacher called him aside and asked if he would like some help in learning to read. That's how he ended up at

ALTA in my class. He stayed for a while, but got into the MUST programme and left. I wonder how he's doing. There must be thousands like him out there. I cannot understand how he went through the system, through Common Entrance and 14 Plus with dyslexia, and never got the required help.

Some students drive to class and I often wonder how they got their permits, or how they read the signs on the roads. I write the word 'danger' to see if they can read it. Many can't. That's a wake-up call for many people in my class.

What turns on a light for the students is when they can put their ideas into writing. You see a light go on. They are able to see their own expressions come to life. It's fascinating for them to hear someone else read the ideas that were once stuck in their heads because they couldn't write.

There are construction workers who after completing one level at ALTA say, "You know what I did today?" And they tell you about a form they filled out, a sign they read and what they were able to read in the newspaper with such pride that it fills you with joy. The joy, the pride, the visible growth in stature that I witness in the students when they have mastered a literacy skill such as filling out a form, writing a receipt or reading an article – things many take for granted – keep me selfishly coming back to ALTA for more.

Tutor Profiles



Noreen de la Rosa tutoring a student

Noreen: 19 Years at ALTA

When they wrote their stories of abuse and were able to read them aloud to someone who cared, she described it as being like a load lifted off their shoulders...

by Mariella Garcia

Noreen de la Rosa holds the ALTA long-service record with 19 years of service and counting! It all started with her parish priest asking her to volunteer at the Servol Life Centre in St. Ann's. At Servol, almost 25 years ago, Noreen realised the youth who attended the centre could not read. Noreen promptly changed from teaching them singing to teaching them reading.

But her only experience with reading, like most ALTA tutors, was that she loved to read. Armed with her passion for reading, and her willingness to teach reading to a group of 16-year-olds, Noreen looked around for reading materials to use. She knew she couldn't use children's books like *West Indian Reader*, so she began to compile her own collection, ranging from competition forms to fast-food menus. She had a cardboard box full of reading material by her bed.

Noreen acknowledges that while she was teaching the children to fill out forms and read the different items she collected, she had no clue of what she was doing. Then one day she read in the newspaper that ALTA wanted to support literacy tutors and there was a number to call, and she thought "Ah ha, I better find out what I am supposed to be doing!"

Noreen realised that she was on the right track, using forms and material not geared to primary school students. At ALTA she learned about phonics and the accompanying rules, which she thought were fabulous. She said she was a poor speller and since becoming an ALTA tutor her spelling has improved because she remembers the rules just like her students.

On the growth of ALTA over the past 20 years, Noreen is nothing short of amazed. She recalls how ALTA's first office was the old barbershop in the Queen's Park Hotel with volunteers taking shifts a few hours a day to answer the phone. When she completed the ALTA training course, the second ALTA class opened at the Servol Life Centre in Cascade.

She was at ALTA when there were no ALTA student workbooks. Every week a few ladies, including Hilary Montgomery, would meet at their homes in the mornings and create their own worksheets. If it worked, they would send it to Paula at the Woodbrook venue and she in turn would send them what she was using. This went on until there were enough worksheets to publish a book.

Noreen says that often new tutors are not aware of how difficult it is to create a worksheet, as it is structured in such a way that each lays the foundation for the subsequent lesson. Over the years tutors have asked Noreen if the ALTA worksheets are relevant to the early teens at the Servol Junior Life Centre and, being game for new material, she provides them with the structure of how new worksheets can be built. To date she has not received a single one.

Over her 19 years of teaching at ALTA she has met some memorable students. Noreen fondly recalls a young man of 16 who bravely volunteered to help publicise ALTA's student registration by going on Dateline. While he was being interviewed by Allyson Hennessy, Noreen says she nearly fell off her chair in shock when he said he never learned to read and write because he was "the bright one." As one of six children, his mother kept him home from school to steal every day since he was around the age of six or seven, because he was 'bright'. Noreen is still in touch with this student as they meet regularly at Hi Lo. He is a successful mechanic who is now married with two children who attend Bishop Anstey Junior. Noreen says that through his success, his family's outlook on life has changed.

She also remembers ALTA students whose lives changed not so much by gaining a certificate as by learning to cope with their everyday environment. She recalls Agnes, who came into class and stood in the front of the room with her hands on her hips and proudly declared, "My madam this morning bought a new pancake mix, and I knew to put milk into the mixture and not water!" Noreen said that Agnes was so thrilled that she was

able to read the instructions. ALTA changed her life completely.

The advice Noreen would give to new tutors is to get to know your students. She believes that for students coming to ALTA, class is not only about reading progress, but about progress in all aspects of their lives. In the early days when students were not given set topics, they often wrote about their childhood experiences and there were many stories of abuse. When they wrote their stories of abuse and were able to read them aloud to someone who cared, it was like a load being lifted off their shoulders. One middle-aged woman said to her, "You are the first person who ever believed me." Now that someone was at last listening, she could let it go.

Noreen also believes that ALTA tutors would benefit from trying a new skill. She said that after joining a tap dancing class around the age of 50, she got an appreciation of how difficult it can be for an adult to learn a new skill, especially if their brain has been wired one way for most of their lives and they may not have had much of an aptitude for it.

Noreen is determined that as long as she has strength, she will continue as an ALTA tutor.

Janet: Called from Accounts

I can't tell you the joy that you get when you see a student discover that he can write his name or spell a word on his own...

by Camille Parmassar

"My vocabulary was rebate, discount, delinquent, balance sheet." Janet Joseph makes that statement self-deprecatingly aware of the double meaning. Initially, tutoring did not come easily since Janet came to ALTA after 38 years in accounting – hence the vocabulary – but the sheer joy she received from witnessing a student's progress and seeing that smile of confidence on his face propelled her to dig deeper and her natural talent soared.

She joined ALTA in 1998 and is now a veteran tutor with her imprint firmly stamped on the St James morning venue. She was already a catechist in her church and it did not take her long to realise that there was no line of separation between being an ALTA tutor and a catechist, since skills learnt at one benefitted the other.

She can boast of many firsts, many stemming from her superb

administrative and organizational skills. Janet was the first tutor to laminate the initial assessment

sheets, which made sense since at the beginning of each academic year, these sheets are passed from one tutor to another. Credit must be given to her initiative in making actual wooden 'syllable dominoes' pieces which engage and encourage the students to identify open and closed syllables, as well as to read words when they are playing the game of

Janet Joseph teaching at Harvard, St. James



syllable dominoes. Tutors who join the Harvard venue with Janet are blessed not only because she has the materials meticulously organised, but she spares no effort in offering words of support and encouragement to fellow tutors, new and continuing.

She and her co-tutors were the first to organise a successful one-day trip to Tobago for their class. Through the THA, she arranged for a bus to greet them at the port in Tobago and take them around the island. Whatever the event, she is at the fore of the organizing. At Christmas she organises a sharing among tutors and students at her venue, with a successful gift exchange and of course, Janet is the one to bring the Christmas tablecloths and trinkets to make the occasion memorable.

Janet is a true ALTA ambassador. Apart from her voluntary commitment to tutoring, she is always willing to go the extra mile. She has represented ALTA at public fairs showcasing the work of the organization and assisted at the ALTA office. She has taught the ALTA programme at Civilian Conservation Corps, the Retraining Programme of the Ministry of Tertiary Education, St. Michael's School for Boys and All in One Child Development Centre. At St Michael's, she faced flying chairs as boys brought their quarrel into class and at All in One, flying bullets during a police chase outside. At All in One, as students and tutors hit the floor, Janet understood why the Lord had placed her in a sweltering room with no windows!

Along the way she formed a bond with students that extends away from the classroom and some of her ex-students are still in touch and she now patronises the business that she helped one to form.

Janet's advice to new tutors is, "Be committed and passionate about what you do. Remember that you are part of a team, so share with other tutors what is working for you." She believes that by being an ALTA tutor, you are not only helping others but that you yourself grow as an individual. "I can't tell you the joy that you get when you see a student discover that he can write his name or spell a word on his own. Over my fourteen years, I have seen ALTA grow and progress in several ways. Tutors no longer have to make sight words, phonics and rule cards. These are now presented to them at the start of the academic year along with a games CD. The attendance register, tutor and student reports are now done electronically, and at the end of the academic year the students are exposed to a basic computer course courtesy BG Trinidad & Tobago Limited, and they also have access to computer practice/training at the ALTA office. Isn't that great! We have come a long way from those days at Fernandes compound."

"ALTA makes you aware of your environment. You become more compassionate and more sensitive to people's needs. In short you become a better individual. I am proud to be an ALTA tutor. Thoughts of leaving ALTA have not yet been conceived but when the time comes that I am unable to tutor, I will become a Reading Circle guide, where students can come to get help with their reading and comprehension."

In the meantime, much like the ALTA native recipe book her class once produced, Janet continues to uphold the ALTA vision – an alternative to improve adult literacy in Trinidad and Tobago.

Marrows: Lady of Many Hats

I am out of my league many times. You say, 'Well you trained to be an ALTA tutor, you didn't come here for all this.' But if a student comes to you and says, 'Miss I going to kill myself yes, I fed up...'

As a child Marilyn Jordan Romany used to read the newspaper to her father. If she stumbled over a word, she would break it into parts to figure it out. Marilyn's father could not read and so "Marrows," as she is fondly called, fed him his daily dose of news.

Her father owned the only radio in the neighbourhood and kept himself informed via the broadcast instrument and Marilyn's reading abilities. Despite his reading handicap, he was popular and respected and his home was the regular liming place for listening to radio, playing cards and a little babash.

In hindsight, maybe Marilyn was destined to become an adult literacy tutor as her personal experience with her father's reading challenges created empathy for those who were unable to read. Reading was always easy for her.

The rootsy and confident woman heard about ALTA back in 2001 and Marilyn just knew she wanted to be a part of the

organisation's work. Unwittingly she went to the Vistabella venue for students' registration and filled out a students' assessment form. The assessor, Marilyn Rampersad Talma, realised instantly that Marilyn did not need help with reading, but was there to become a tutor.

Like most new tutors, Marilyn was amazed at how much there is to learn about literacy and teaching adults to read. She says: "Most of us who can read don't understand the difficulties struggling readers face."

Sensitised by her father's inability to read Marilyn points out, "Every student is not the same. They come out of a school system that did not work for them."

She feels challenged in helping students with serious learning disabilities. "Sometimes you tell them something and they understand it and you walk around the class and when you come back they can remember nothing you did before. And

that could be frustrating. A few have problems which I am really not able to help with."

What Marilyn found she really could help with was being a sympathetic listener. After classes, she would stay back to talk with students who wanted advice. Some of their issues, such as marital problems and domestic violence, are more than she felt she could cope with, but she finds that listening is the key to helping students.

"I am out of my league many times. You say, 'Well you trained to be an ALTA tutor, you didn't come here for all this.' But if a student comes to you and says, 'Miss, I going to kill myself yes, I fed up... nobody ent like me at home,' you can't go home and lie down and sleep. You have to just pray that the right words come in your mouth and just talk."

So Marilyn wears many hats at ALTA. She is tutor, born-again Christian, counsellor, friend, humorist, mother figure, coordinator at other classes and spokesperson. She has been part of ALTA's private and workplace tutors' cadre for almost ten years, when she joined other tutors in ALTA's partnership with the Ministry of Science, Technology and Tertiary Education's Retraining Programme.

Tutors who have mastered at least two levels of the ALTA programme have the opportunity to use the ALTA methods and resources to earn money. Marilyn has taught Level 2, Beginner and, for a short time, Level 3 classes. She is one of the tutors who welcomes selected students into her home.

For months, one student came to her from Tobago by boat for private tuition. Once she realised that the boat came in at 5.30am, he would have breakfast with her and her husband. The student was a fisherman and he often brought freshly caught, cleaned filleted fish and produce he grew in his garden.

So while there is more than one kind of tangible reward in being an ALTA tutor, Marilyn will tell you that the students' progress, as halting as it may be, is the most satisfying reward "whether it's their new confidence in writing out bills and receipts or in comfortably transacting business at a bank."



Marilyn Jordan Romany

She proudly says, "I feel I did that. I used the ALTA programme, but I had a part in that. I feel I am making a good contribution not just to these people's lives but to society as a whole, because they would learn something that they would pass on. So it would have a domino effect."

Fortunately for ALTA and its students, tutors like Marilyn are the norm. They are strong, dedicated, constant learners giving new meaning to the words 'giving as good as they get'.

Tutors interested in being employed to teach the ALTA Programme must:

- have taught the ALTA Programme for two consecutive years
- have taught at least two ALTA levels
- be a highly proficient ALTA tutor
- regularly attend (90%) ALTA community classes
- have attended at least one refresher course within the previous two years.





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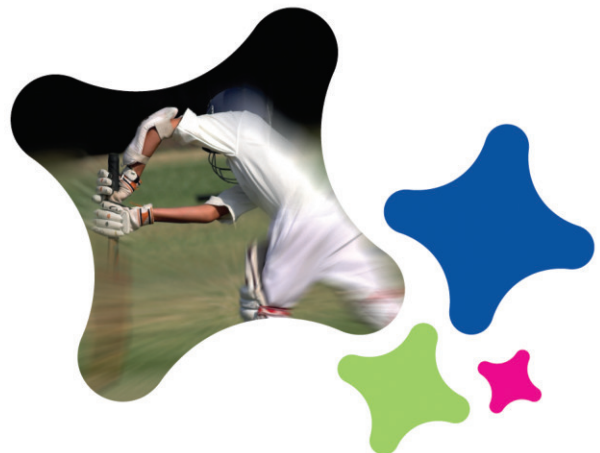
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Tutor Writing



ALTA Bonds

by Marilyn Rampersad-Talma

My mother can only sign her name and fill out daily Play Whe slips when she dreams the night before. Every so often we get a sting of her wisdom with sayings like: "My chest is not a freezer, whatever I have in here is to let out." She recalls a man named Charlie from South Trinidad

who never used the gold watch he owned because he couldn't tell time. The position of the sun in the sky would direct him ... and others. I always wonder what he did during the rainy season.

I also wonder how my mother survived barely being able to read and write. When she left Barrackpore where she was born and came to live with my grandmother, she was not given the opportunity to go to school. Yet she raised and nurtured seven children to be wholesome individuals. All seven are literate and acknowledge the value of an education. Why did my mother insist, despite the pitch-oil flambeau and the shade full with soot, that her children went to school? My older sister spent many, many years in hospital with polio. When she was released, the primary school in Gran Couva refused to admit her, saying she was too old. She stayed at home to take care of me and my sister. Just before she got married, she was taught how to sew and, with reading and writing help from the Couva ALTA class, she opened and managed her sewing business. She has since moved on to a much better life.

I applied for the literacy tutor position thinking it was a job. I got a call from Paula inviting me to the tutor training, which at the time was only in POS. I told her that funds were low, but I could attend if it were in central. Around January 1995 I got another call. The ALTA training was being held at the Learning Resource Centre, Couva. That was my start at ALTA. I still have my homework assignment from the training course – an ALTA Level 2 lesson. Trainer Hilary Montgomery stopped halfway not knowing how to comment on my lesson. She didn't understand what I had done – and neither did I! I keep it to remind me where I started and how much I have learnt. When I first went to the class I did not know how to teach, but I got assistance from my co-tutor Mrs Ruth Phillips. Whenever I am in a jam, it is an ALTA tutor I call. When my husband passed away, I remember calling co-trainer Arlene Romero at 3am. She was up because her mother was ill. She listened, she cared.

ALTA forms bonds not just between the tutors. Kathy Ann and I have been friends since we met in 1998. She still attends the ALTA classes. Ballo comes from a family of 13, all unable to read and write. I assist him with the occasional form to collect his disability benefit. Two students from Tabaguite got married after meeting at ALTA class. When last I saw the gentleman, he was still very much in love with his wife and had three children. He assured me that his children will attend school and learn.

Lack of literacy skills can stifle one in a deep, dark hole. A student of mine lost the man she loved when he found out she could not read. Wedding plans in the making were cancelled. She sank into depression and is yet to recover. Literacy students are really afraid of asking for help, fearful of our reactions!

At my bedside I have so many books waiting to be read. I bought some I may never read. How can anyone not want to help others to enjoy that feeling, that feeling of true independence?



Camille takes minutes at tutor meeting during her years as secretary to the ALTA board

Little did I know...

by Camille Parmassar

Little did I know that when I joined ALTA

I would have become a co-ordinator,
An interviewer, a small group trainer
And run into so many problems with the schwa.

Little did I know...

... After all, I simply wanted to be a tutor.

Little did I know that solid friendships
would be formed with students
That we would trade resilience for independence

That life would be rewarding and fulfilling

Without position grabbing.

Little did I know...

... After all, I simply wanted to be a tutor.

Little did I know that volunteering
could be such fun

That a fraternity of tutors would be second to none

That I could be counted as one,
And that together, through ALTA, we
could empower a nation.

Little did I know...

... After all, I simply wanted to be a tutor.



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An ALTA Ambassador

by Tricia Carter Natta

After a long career in education, I moved to Point Fortin in 2008 from Manchester, UK and decided to continue unpaid teaching locally through ALTA. By attending a class as an observer, being interviewed, then completing six days of training and most of my homework, I finally succeeded in satisfying Paula and her team of trainers that I did indeed have the necessary skills and knowledge!

The ALTA timetable of activity across the academic year allows little flexibility and can require prospective tutors and students to wait a while, though in my case this did not deter me. It was satisfying to see the transformation of the other volunteers, many without teaching experience, into tutors working confidently with these new ideas and techniques. Spending time with like-minded folk on such a worthwhile and well-organised project was a joy only to be repeated at tutor meetings.

Following enrolments in September, I was one of three tutors allocated to work in a rural beauty spot, New Village Community Centre. We started with 10 Level 1 and 8 Level 2 students and, although some dropped out, there were 9 students who continued right through the year and were able to make good progress. Their ages ranged from 17 to 55, so interests and opinions were varied!

Telephone planning between lessons was crucial in co-ordinating our team teaching and ensuring all materials were on hand. Everyone learnt new things, especially me, and with the aid of my Trinidad English dictionary, it turned out I was the only one who could define a quenk. Four observers in term 2 kept us all on our toes, although one student found their unexpected presence rather distracting and next year I will prepare them for this. The suggested games were especially appreciated and others were tried out, including making words from the letters in a longer word.

We all agreed on an outing to Point-a-Pierre Wildfowl Trust and had a successful visit in May. One week later, the Trust celebrated its 45th anniversary and photos of international VIP visitors appeared in the newspaper, prompting the comment, "But we were there first, Miss!" I also attended the centre to watch their Talent Quest final, which had been organised by some of the students.

Unfortunately, my co-tutors both moved on to paid work (in Nigeria and Port-of-Spain), which prevented them attending the late afternoon class, and I found myself teaching a combined Level 1 and 2 group during Term 3.

The details in tutor books and back-up from Gloria Ferdinand, my area co-ordinator, made this possible and in some way my situation improved as there was no longer a need to share the whiteboard! I am hoping to continue as tutor for this class next year, with new co-tutors, and try to be an ambassador for ALTA wherever I go – I even bought the T-shirt.

Spending time with like-minded folk on such a worthwhile and well-organised project was a joy... I try to be an ambassador for ALTA wherever I go.



Tricia Carter Natta



A Positive Change

by Gem Rowe, ALTA Board Secretary

One day my home became an empty nest and I felt that it was time for me to attempt to do something meaningful. But what?

I have to thank Cynthia Ellis for planting the ALTA seed in my mind. She spoke in glowing terms

about Paula Lucie-Smith and her team at the Adult Literacy Tutors Association (ALTA) and what a great job they were doing in enabling adults to read and write. I decided that

It was time for me to attempt to do something meaningful... ALTA has provided me the opportunity to make a positive change.

this was something I could do.

Meanwhile I had seen the ALTA ad in the newspapers and I made up my mind that this was where I would volunteer my time. I contacted the office and was called in for an interview. I was accepted into the programme to be trained as a tutor and I have been doing that since 2004.

Volunteer work is serving others for free; being an ALTA tutor doesn't feel like work to me. In fact I view it as an opportunity to make a change in the life of an adult in a way that sometimes I do not fully comprehend, including changes in my own life! Working with the ALTA student has turned out to be a most rewarding experience. To witness first-hand the surprise first and then the joy of the student when he "gets" what we are trying to teach him is very special. Our students appreciate our time and effort and this inspires and motivates me to go to class each week.

Classes are held in a non-threatening environment where students do not feel that someone is holding a "big stick" over them to get it right all the time. It may take some students longer than others to read fluently. However they know that there is a place for them at ALTA until they acquire the literacy skills to earn acceptance in a society that can be very uncaring to those who are challenged by words.

ALTA has provided me the opportunity to make a positive change in the life of an adult who otherwise would be denied the advantages of the written word that so many of us take for granted. If you have the time, why not consider joining this remarkable NGO?

My Third Career

by Hamilton T. Padmore, ALTA Board Treasurer

By 2006, I had completed two careers. In my first career in the Public Service I had been an office manager for the greater part of ten years. My second career spanned 30 years in the field of finance and accounting in the petroleum industry. During this period, I had been involved in a parallel career as a part-time university lecturer.

As I entered my third career, I realised I had one prerequisite for managing this phase of my life, i.e. I had been teaching for some decades. My personal development (career) plan involved my becoming a member of the Adult Literacy Tutors Association (ALTA) of Trinidad and Tobago, to volunteer my time, my talent and my treasure for at least another decade.

In May 2006, I attended one full week of tutor training, accepted a position as a tutor in September 2006, and six years later, I am still tutoring.

Three years ago, I was invited to become a member of the ALTA Board of Directors.

In May 2011 and 2012, I was invited to assist in the five-day training programme for new tutors.

Over the past six years at ALTA, in addition to being a tutor, I have shared three other areas of expertise.

The first was in the area of computer technology, using Microsoft Excel to develop an electronic register to capture students' attendance at class.

The second area of expertise was to introduce an aspect of office safety at ALTA. ALTA now has a comprehensive Emergency Evacuation Plan and a higher level of awareness of the Occupational Safety and Health Act.

The third area is my role on the Board as the person responsible for the financial aspects of ALTA's business. I have introduced a stronger internal control environment thereby minimizing the number of audit exceptions.

The foregoing outlines the voluntary application of my varying talents within the ALTA environment. These I have labeled the intangible treasures that I contribute to the ALTA community.

In addition to the intangible treasures which I offer at ALTA, I have received the Board's approval to sponsor the Level 3 class I teach at the St. George's College centre.

These have been very fruitful years of my third career. I remain committed to lifelong learning and service excellence. One major discovery is the tremendous learning opportunity that ALTA has provided me in the winter of my life. I have treated the ALTA student as my customer to whom I provide quality service with excellence.



One major discovery is the tremendous learning opportunity that ALTA has provided me in the winter of my life...

ALTA Daze

by Brenda De Silva, ALTA Board Public Relations Officer

So here I was thinking retirement approaches. I've been a broadcast presenter for all of 37 years – no job hopping in my day – so naturally ALTA is going to be elated to have me volunteer with them! What misplaced belief! Not quite *Dies Irae*, but I was about to meet the Judge's searching eyes.

Well organised organization that it is, ALTA has its policies and screening methods for volunteer tutors to guard against students being further traumatised by tutors who might have traits that discouraged students in their school days.

But I did clear the interview and training hurdles and started teaching the ALTA method in 2005. And, I'm still here.

For a retiree, staying with ALTA is a natural since we have a legitimate reason to get out into society and keep the little grey cells working, but a great incentive to continue is the well-applied moral suasion from our admirable founder.

Between 2005 and 2012, I've been a tutor at three Levels, 1, 2 and currently 3 – can Beginner be far behind? – board member for going on seven years after a failed resignation attempt – more moral suasion – interviewee on radio and TV during publicity drives, a coordinator for other classes, facilitator at Refreshers and Tutor Training Courses, one of a group of proof readers, recently a trainer for new tutors in a small range of skills, AND, coming full circle, a member of the interviewing panel to screen new tutors!

I've had great enjoyment in learning the teaching methods, improving my skills, interacting with and learning from the students and working with wonderfully skilled tutors...

in supporting Paula Lucie-Smith's brilliant work.

I have gained a lot these past years, not least of which is patience, though it did come 'dropping slow'; and I hope, for the store remaining to me, to continue to grow as ALTA does.



ALTA has its policies and screening methods for volunteer tutors to guard against students being further traumatised...

I've had great enjoyment in learning the teaching methods, improving my skills – my handwriting has improved, I can almost always immediately tell my left hand from my right – interacting with and learning from the students, working with wonderfully skilled tutors

Lessons

by Marise Warner, ALTA Board Legal Officer

ALTA, it is fair to say, captivated me – initially through a radio advertisement at a time when, having just graduated from law school, I still had all the enthusiasm of youth and a dire need to direct my energies into a worthwhile pursuit before life's routines and society's blueprint for living absorbed me.

The opportunity was a true godsend. I have always admired teachers. It had, for some time, been my dream to become one. Not every profession has the privilege of being a vocation. Teaching holds that honour. I was from a family of natural teachers – the greatest being my mother – I was sure to excel.

Unfortunately, I approached teaching adult literacy with all the arrogance that epitomises everything a true teacher is not. I can do it, therefore I can teach it. I understand it, therefore it is easily understood. It is an approach that assumes sameness, which does not cater for differences and, of course, is the reason for ALTA's existence. I found reading simple; teaching it would be too.

I had made my first mistake. ALTA's requirement to complete a training course baffled me. Bafflement and arrogance quickly gave way to immense humility and tremendous awe in my first minute at the training course. Reading and writing are not at all simple. They are complex, multi-faceted and layered processes. The natural speller has no difficulty choosing *er* for term, *ir* for girl, and *ur* for burn. For others, this choice represents a challenge.

I became fascinated. English spelling makes no sense we often say. But, those who have taken the time to examine and understand language will assert that it is more sensible and rule-based than we realise. Silent *e* at the end of the word makes the vowel say its name. That silent *e* which we may consider absolutely useless turns *win* to *wine*, *fat* to *fate*, and *mop* to *mope*. That *e* again when paired with *g* at the end of a word makes *g* soft. So *wag* become *wage*; *hug* becomes *huge*.

And so a teacher-to-be had her first lesson. What we perceive to be marginal may in fact be central; the peripheral may be pivotal. A lesson about life and about people – most appropriate in the context of adult literacy. There began my interest in spelling rules that would





ALTA tutors at annual refresher

smaller parts – so that they can read independently an unfamiliar word by putting the syllables together. Before the students had applied the syllable division technique to divide the words, I asked them to read the words.

Of course the reason we teach syllable division is so they can use the technique to read the words. I had asked them to fish, but I still held the fishing rod. Eventually, I came to appreciate, and worked to ensure that my students did as well, that syllable division is a manifestation of a basic but critical life technique. Just as the longest word is but a collection of small syllables, the most arduous journey is but a collection of small steps.

For many, literacy poses a challenge at any age, but the trial

Bafflement and arrogance quickly gave way to immense humility and tremendous awe in my first minute at the training course...

eventually lead me to contribute to materials development.

In 1997, the training course was six intensive and consecutive days. In those six days I was inspired, impressed and challenged. I was particularly impressed by the

focus not just on the adult learner, but the adult learner of literacy. The reading material was neither juvenile nor esoteric. It was useful, relevant, informative, inspiring and life-changing, seeking to capture the interest of adults, impart practical life skills and effect social change – all while improving literacy. Topics ranged from bank forms, medicine labels, voting procedure, Lara and child care to understanding anger. At 25, I knew that this was no flimsy operation. After a mere five years, it was a robust, purposeful, structured and idealistic organisation that I was privileged to have found and am proud to have given fifteen years of my youth.

It was with trepidation that I began teaching in September of 1997 alongside ALTA's founder. I had found humility in the training course, and my first assignment was with the person I considered the guru – a fortunate assignment, it turned out, because although I had been an ardent and receptive student on the course, I began teaching with knowledge, but without skill. We so often confuse the two.

And so I had my second lesson. You have not really grasped the theory unless you are successful at practice. Our practice is often limited by our failure to grasp the theory. One incident stands out. I was assisting students with a syllable division exercise. The purpose of the exercise is to show students how to divide words into syllables – where to split the word into

is even greater when you are an adult struggling to cope with the demands of parenthood and earning a living – for some a less than modest living (sometimes in shift work or more than one job). As ALTA teachers we have four hours a week to impart skills that are usually taught intensively for several days a week and for several hours in succession. Employers are not always facilitative, and seasonal work often cuts into class time. Students have to do work at home if they are to make progress. Often they'll tell you they are too tired – an indisputable claim when you look at them struggling to stay awake in class. Or, the pervasive shame factor may result in them being reluctant to do work at home under the gaze of an unsupportive spouse or the shame of being a parent with less knowledge than his child. The reasons are numerous.

Early on I realised I could be either an observer or a participant in my students' struggles. Once I chose participation, I was fuelled by their dedication. Often I worked with them to devise workable study plans. And this became another of my ALTA lessons. We are quick to erect barriers, to bombard with a barrage of excuses and reasons why a task cannot be completed.

And so I learned that when circumstances are not optimal, do what is practical. Some could only spare a few minutes just before bed or upon waking. Others worked in the maxi or over lunch, pairing their review with any activity that would permit divided attention – a reminder that multi-tasking multiplies time. Some of them found ways to disguise their reading material to preserve their pride in public.

In every sphere of our lives we face a choice between innovation and stagnation. With Paula at our helm, innovation has indeed been the essence of ALTA's operation and the key to its longevity. We evolved from a single class using newspaper

extracts (the days before ALTA books) into an organisation with over 50 classes around the country and with a range of structured self-published reading material and learning aids that cater for the absolute Beginner, the problem speller, the grammatically challenged and so many more – into an organisation that maintains its quality through a system of class coordinators and a yearly retraining requirement.

Just as ALTA offers no quick fix; innovation too was a process. We sought to move beyond the regular spelling choices and word patterns. So instead of focusing simply on words like *notice* and *kiss* that are regular choices to spell (is), we incorporated words like *surface* and for (in) we leapt beyond words like *bin* and included words like *bargain*, which uses ain (and in the main gives a different sound altogether in a word like *plain*).

We remained cognisant of the fact that a successful spelling programme had to cater for Creole speakers. So instead of limiting our review of silent letter patterns to words like *tomb* and *know*, we incorporated Creole patterns like *ct* in *fact*, *ft* in *gift* and *nd* in *stand*. Similarly, Creole creates its own homophones: round and wrong; ball and bald; and find and fine.

The enthrallment I had garnered in the training course with the intricacies of reading and spelling rules grew. I too was inspired to venture into lesson creation and materials development. During my childhood, my mother had set the foundation through dramatic, imaginative and indisputably effective teaching methods.

I became interested in creating teaching methods that would boost understanding, not only for the benefit of my students, but for my fellow teachers as well. Motivated by the ALTA philosophy, we added lessons on cancer prevention, nutrition labels, labour law and how to write a simple will and a basic contract to the programme. I joined ALTA's study of word patterns in an effort to design rules that could simplify spelling for those who lacked phonological awareness. And here came another lesson. Rules, particularly spelling rules are prone to exceptions. The exceptions are often daunting and so contradictory that there is a temptation to eliminate the entire rule. For me, they serve as a reminder that in life the norm is never all-encompassing. To be all-embracing we must not merely contemplate difference: we must cater for it. And, to put it simply, driven by a more inclusive and all-embracing teaching philosophy, our school system would cater for dyslexia.

Did I eventually become a good teacher? Teaching, I realised, demands of its true devotees the fundamental characteristics that the conscience demands of a good human being – selflessness, empathy and self-awareness; teaching at ALTA and, indeed, any kind of remedial

teaching requires the characteristics of an excellent human being.

I do believe that the greatest compliment I have received was that I was a good teacher. The truth, though, is that I often considered myself an unsuccessful one. I lost so many. I could not, even with all the will and all the hope I had to impart, hold on to the young men who passed through my class. There were so many. Two stand out – two men with immense potential who could have led remarkable lives, had just a few things been different.

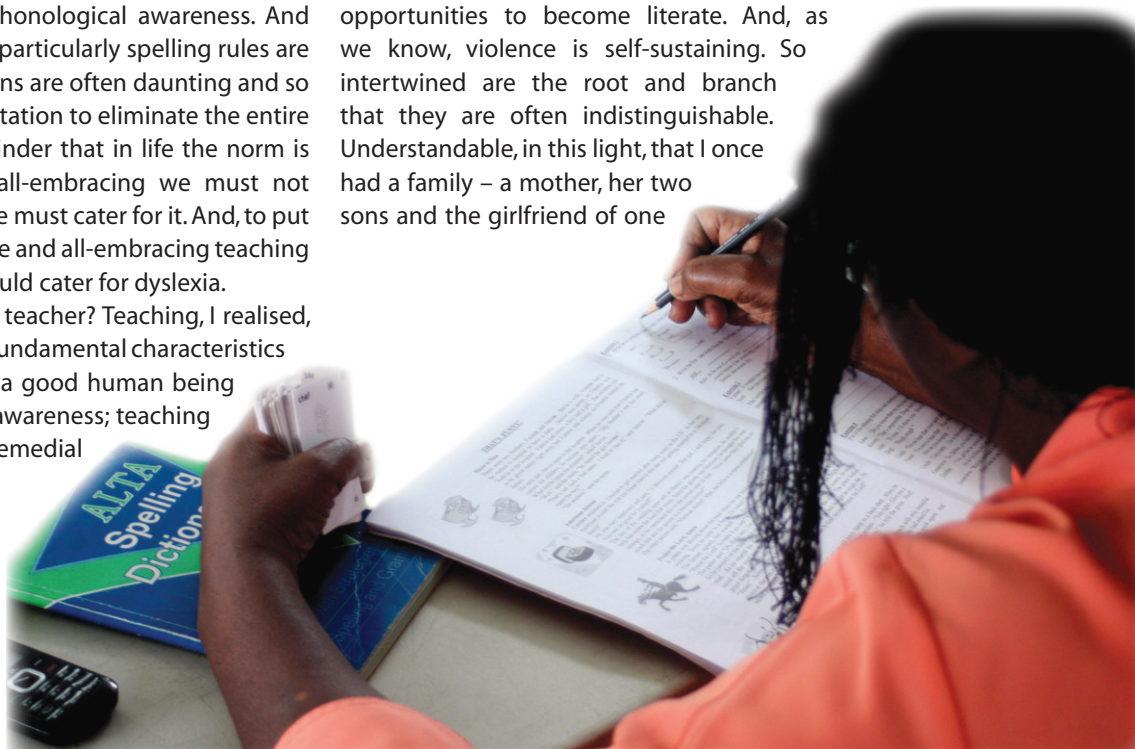
One came to me accompanied by his older brother while still attending a reasonably reputable five-year school. He struggled with combination letter phonics but had a gift for technical drawing and did quite well in practical assignments. But, he crossed my path too late. ALTA offers no immediate panacea.

And, with less than nine months before his CXC examinations, there was not enough time to bring him to a level at which he could do well enough at CXC for him to realise that education was a viable path for him. He disappeared after CXC to assist in his family's roti-making business, never believing as I did that, with his ability and talent, he could have been an architect – if only our primary school system had met his needs.

Another was a young man who by his own admission wavered on the cusp of a life of violence. He spoke often of his great anger at those who disrespected him, how he was tempted to retaliate and his struggle to resist what he called "the influences". He was an eager student and an earnest person, always late because he insisted on going home to shower after work but was always willing to stay back to catch up on what he had missed. One day he simply stopped coming to class, and I was unable to track him down.

Both men were ensnared by the cyclonic forces that keep some of us marking time, trapped in a vortical loop. Low literacy limits job prospects and limited job prospects restrict opportunities to become literate. And, as we know, violence is self-sustaining. So intertwined are the root and branch that they are often indistinguishable. Understandable, in this light, that I once had a family – a mother, her two sons and the girlfriend of one

ALTA does indeed represent a second chance – a second chance for the student and a second chance for us as a nation to right an egregious and pervasive wrong.



Dictionary for those who can't read

By CORDIELLE STREET

IS your spelling shaky? If it is, you are one of the thousands who stand to benefit from the Spelling Dictionary launched recently by the Adult Literacy Tutors Association (ALTA).

"The material is adult-focused so the content is different from what people would see in the school system and we use a very structured approach and we have borrowed a lot of the techniques used for teaching dyslexics," explained Paula Lucie-Smith the dictionary's co-author.

Lucie-Smith, noting Trinidad and Tobago's literacy problems, said "77 per cent of the population... has some basic reading and writing skills. Within that 77 per cent really only 45 per cent can read and understand the Express, so you are down to about less than half of the 77 per cent if you are looking at people at newspaper level."

Lucie-Smith said "if you are giving a good reading instruction and that person is not reading—is not

Typical signs to look for are reversal of letters, people reading words 'was' for 'saw'... dyslexia to some extent is a sequencing difficulty that they tend to see the whole thing and not the order in which things are."

But not everyone who has problems learning to read is dyslexic. Adults may have had vision or hearing problems as a child that were never brought to anyone's attention. Also, injuries of various sorts to the brain, blows to the head, or a stroke can impede the learning process.

What makes ALTA's Spelling Dictionary unique is that it teaches strategies for spelling



AUTHORS Paula Lucie-Smith and Marise Warner (left) present a copy of the ALTA Spelling Dictionary to Arjen van den Berg, Charge d'Affaires at the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Looking on is Beverley Yorke. Photo: STEVE MCPHIE

of the sons – at my venue. Eventually we lost the two young men and then the mother, and in time, the girlfriend.

On the matter of our success at ALTA – teachers and students – a spelling strategy may provide a useful metaphor. At ALTA there is a spelling strategy we employ that requires students to write and say a word three times when learning to spell it. For some, three rounds of writing and saying does not guarantee retention. The average system does not work for everyone. Perhaps, for them, six rounds are needed – six in succession or three in the morning and three more sometime later. Perhaps 10 are needed. Like life, in spelling there are many routes to the one destination, though some routes are lengthier or more gruelling. In the end, perseverance and resilience are a greater measure of success than the route or the outcome. The struggles and triumphs of our students remind of this, for just as the oft repeated paradox says that the child is father of the man, we know that the teacher is student of the pupil.

I approach this anniversary with mixed feelings. I am overwhelmed with pride that ALTA has been both a bastion and an exemplar in the NGO community and has proven itself beyond doubt as a servant of progress. But, in a society that is truly advancing, ALTA would be contracting, not growing. Our classes would become redundant, not more abundant. We would have run through the typical marketing product life cycle and be in or approaching a period of decline, and so, even as I celebrate our milestone, I hope that the next 20 years will bring about our extinction. And then perhaps we do what every business does at the end of its product lifecycle, we search for a new market. We harness the spirit, devotion and passion of our volunteers; we grab hold of new tools; we retrain and direct our energies to addressing a different need.

I write this not as an indictment against our beloved 50-year-old nation but as an observation about an area of vulnerability in our society that, I must point out, is not unique to Trinidad and Tobago or to the developing world. According to Dr Barry Parker of the Medical and Dental Defence Union of Scotland

in an article dated November 4, 2011 and published online by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC): "One in six people in the UK have a literacy level below that expected of an 11-year old." He alludes to many of the same causes that we at ALTA have identified "dyslexia, health problems, disrupted schooling or stresses acting

as barriers to learning in childhood" and to the fact that they successfully employ coping strategies to conceal their problem. What is even more disturbing is the linkage made in this article and in another article also published by the BBC between illiteracy and ill health. Referring to an article published in the British Medical Journal, a second BBC article dated March 16, 2012 and entitled "Poor literacy increases early death risk for elderly" established a linkage between lower health literacy and the prevalence of depressive symptoms, physical limitations and chronic diseases, such as heart disease, diabetes, stroke and asthma. Dr Parker highlights the life-threatening danger of a patient with low literacy misinterpreting instructions that prescribe a weekly dosage of a potent drug and taking a daily dose instead.

This takes my mind back to the significance of the ALTA lesson in which students read labels for the fictitious drugs Banflu and Flugon. It also brings to mind the other losses of my teaching years. In five years, three students died – Lenora, Inglebert and Travous – all from the same venue, all under 50. I often wonder whether literacy could have set them upon a different trajectory and, in some way, prolonged their lives.

I consider ALTA the most defining and profound experience of my youth. Aspiring teachers are reminded of the importance of regular attendance and dedication to their commitment because of the possibility that students will be failed for the second time in their lives. ALTA does indeed represent a second chance – a second chance for the student and a second chance for us as a nation to right an egregious and pervasive wrong.

I am optimistic because hope and generosity are also self-sustaining. Earlier this year, I did indeed receive an infusion of that tireless, self-burgeoning impetus we call hope when, almost a decade later, a young man from my lost family phoned me – not once but twice – to let me know he was regretful, had reprioritized and was ready to return to ALTA. I will forever hold fast to my belief that although ALTA and its community may be inconspicuous and unglamorous, every skyscraper rests upon an invisible foundation, and the periphery is often the pivot.

My Diverse ALTA Journey: 1997 to 2012

by Maureen Baldeo

I began my teaching career at a senior comprehensive school in South Trinidad in 1989, but after one year I was unceremoniously transferred to a junior secondary school which was even further south. It was the beginning of a mixed blessing.

Teaching at my new school ignited and fueled my search for a method to help the multitude of students who were barely literate. In my youthful naïve way I expressed my amazement to all teachers, principal, vice-principal, ancillary staff that more than 50% of the students in my estimation could not read. I lobbied for reading and numeracy to be taught for a few months to Form 1 students before they embarked on the timetabled eight subjects. The principal asked me if I wanted to make him lose his job. Much as he was sympathetic to my cause, he seemed to think that my enthusiasm was misguided and promptly gave me additional responsibilities.

I attended a 'Teaching of Reading' course given by the Ministry of Education and was overjoyed to get hold of some very good ideas to use with the students, but I lamented that what was needed was a comprehensive, structured programme. The guidance officer at the school was very supportive and pointed me in the direction of useful materials, but no

programme was yet in sight.

One day in 1997 while reading the newspaper, I saw a call for tutors by an organization called the Adult Literacy Tutors Association (ALTA) and I promptly called the number to find out more. A friendly upbeat person gave me the information I needed. I later found out that this was Paula. I was invited to help the tutor at the South ALTA class held at the YMCA, as many new students had recently registered.

On arriving at the YMCA, I politely asked directions of the security guard, who vaguely waved his hand to the back of the ground floor of the building. I then walked into a crowded room with about thirty very ordinary off-the-street people, including a nurse in her white uniform and a few persons dressed in office wear. I quickly apologized and went back to the guard to get the correct directions. To my amazement and the guard's amusement, I was directed back to the room I had just come from.

This time I went back and introduced myself to the tutor, Margaretta Jones, and then sat at the back to observe. I was pleasantly surprised at how well she managed the class which consisted of adults from all walks of life, many of whom were gainfully employed. Thus began my relationship with ALTA.



Maureen Baldeo at ALTA tutors meeting

I was heartened by the commitment of tutor and students and continued for the entire year to assist. I got pre-training from the only Level 3 student Joanne Padilla who taught me the methodology while I added the content. She was a seamstress from Palo Seco who came to class religiously because she wanted to be an even better seamstress as well as able to help her children with their school work.

There was also a young man who struggled through the class, but was so enthusiastic that he inspired everyone. He told the most amusing but touching stories about his work as a cook for a touring music band and his

Tutors celebrate receiving their ALTA certificates at AGM



misadventures in preventing others from realizing that he could not read. His could have been a story of despair. He was given written instructions every morning on the meals he had to prepare for the day. But he was resourceful and had a wide repertoire of methods to get others to read the instructions for him. Eventually he moved onto another job when the pressure became too much. A happy ending or beginning awaited him after he became an ALTA student. After four years of attending classes he opened his own catering business. I was happy to be a witness to this when he came to buy equipment close to my place of work and proudly announced that his call cards which he designed were being printed and he already had several catering jobs.

I was trained as an ALTA tutor in 1998 at the ALTA Office in the Fernandes Compound in Laventille. The training was very enjoyable and allowed me to play games and share my multitude of ideas with anyone who would listen. I felt that I had finally found people who were interested in the teaching of literacy and approached it in a professional manner, infused with common sense and the acceptance of people from all walks of life who spoke the Creole language but had little grasp of Standard English. Moreover ALTA encouraged respect among the tutors and adult learners, which is so crucial to helping adults overcome the negative self-images they carry around from being branded as 'duncy'.

I proceeded to teach ALTA classes at the Naparima Girls' High School from 1998. I subsequently taught Level 3, 2 and 1. The adult learners were much more interested in learning than my day students and the lessons always had content which they enjoyed. I also found that I could help in other ways. I owned a car, which many ALTA tutors in those days didn't. My grey Nissan Sunny became a transport vehicle for students'

workbooks and other materials from Port of Spain to San Fernando at the start of each term for a few years. I even found myself in Point Fortin, delivering books to the home of a new tutor, in my great excitement that the ALTA classes in this southern peninsula were on the verge of increasing.

Humbling memories come to mind. Girly who didn't know how to read entering Level 1, with head down and eyes lowered.

She spoke in the lowest of whispers and I was always conscious of having to be extremely thoughtful when suggesting corrections. Three years later, she was in Level 2 and rushing to volunteer to answer questions and to write the dictation on the blackboard. Her story was one of living with an

alcoholic father whose verbal assaults destroyed her self-confidence. Happily she married someone who was able to read and who encouraged her to improve herself. She did not find a class she was comfortable in until she came to ALTA. By then she had two teenaged children also encouraging her to learn to read.

Then there was the almost 60-year-old truck driver who just wanted to learn to read. He proudly told me about his efficient use of time, learning his sight words and phonic cards while waiting at the quarry for his truck to be filled with gravel. Tears came to his eyes many times when he read a new word. And the cleaner who proudly announced to the entire Caribbean Airlines office in San Fernando that I was her teacher. This was about eight years after I had actually taught her. The office staff looked confused since I seemed so much younger than my student!

By this time I had started to share my ideas with Paula. Unlike many other people, she actually thought many were good, and even enjoyed listening to them. I in turn was impressed and encouraged by her quick thinking and speedy remedial action when there were issues arising in classes.

I had now changed jobs and was working at a company owned by an ALTA board member. Due to his numerous commitments, he suggested that I replace him and I was elected the Marketing Officer. So began my five years as a board member. I became educated as to how a board should really be run and have fond memories of the passionate discussion of ideas to improve all aspects of ALTA. This board genuinely cared about delivery of a superior service, and so it continues to this day.

My next ALTA experience was around the corner waiting for the right time to reveal itself. Taking brief leave from permanent employment, I got an unexpected call from Paula. She wanted to know if I wanted a job at ALTA. There was always a lot to be done and I was happy for such meaningful work.

Thus began my seven-month stint as the Workplace Programme Co-ordinator. Some programmes were already on stream: ArcelorMittal and the government Retraining Programme, and there were promising opportunities to be explored. This I did and to my disappointment realized that a few wanted to use the ALTA assessment to screen out workers who were not literate. My greatest joy came from the Youth Lit Programme, which grew out of my long relationship with libraries and today is a success. I started a new job in 2009 which involved travelling around the Caribbean, a real deterrent to being a regular ALTA tutor. I got another call from ALTA, this time inviting me to be a Reading Circle facilitator. I was interested but again, long work days and work travel came to mind.

The only day I would have any time was Friday but I wasn't sure how many students would attend a Reading Circle then, especially after attending regular ALTA classes for two hours twice weekly. But I said yes and promptly turned up at the Montrose Vedic School the following Friday. And it was a good thing that I did, because there were four adult learners waiting. And so I became, and continue to be, a Reading Circle guide. But that's another story!

I finally had found people who were interested in the teaching of literacy and approached it in a professional manner, infused with common sense and the acceptance of people from all walks of life...



*Sarah Williams
concentrating on
writing in Japanese*

Lessons from ALTA... in Japan

by Sarah Williams

Sarah Williams is a former ALTA Communications Officer, ALTA volunteer tutor, coordinator and trainer. She currently lives and works in Japan as part of the JET Programme. Never far from her thoughts, ALTA and literacy will again be her #1 priority when she returns to T&T.

Have you ever stopped to think how many times each day you must read or write something? Do you ever anticipate the moments? Feel a mix of dread and confusion when everyone but you knows what's going on? Maybe not. After all, here you are enjoying the luxury of perusing a magazine, only to scan the first lines and move on. I don't blame you. That was me almost two years ago – in front of the computer, sitting at the doctor's office, at the library, even at a restaurant. It was only natural to be interested to pick up something to read, only to put it down seconds later – ambivalent.

The moment you cannot read, all these actions seem magnified, as if you're under a spotlight. You pick up a magazine, look at the pictures and put it down and you think 'that man over there must know I cannot read'. You stand looking at a sign too long, and think someone behind you must be saying 'like she can't read!' Every possible insecurity creeps in; so you start faking it. Like that person in the ALTA workbook story.

When I joined ALTA in 2004 fresh out of university, I vaguely remembered what it was like to NOT read. It was my first year of primary school and I would tremble, standing next to the teacher's desk, to read aloud. One mistake and there'd be a heavy hand across my back. It was the memory that made me want to help others in the future, but somehow remembering

the feeling of frustration had faded with time.

That is, until I left Trinidad and moved to Japan.

The experience has been eye opening, not to mention affirming, to the valuable impact of organizations like ALTA. It has also made me painfully aware of some popular misconceptions readers have about non-readers. I'd like to share three:

Reading and writing are elementary

I know what you're saying: Japan is a different country. They speak Japanese, you speak English. Different characters instead of alphabet letters. It's bound to be hard. Truth is, we humans have an innate capacity for language so that listening and speaking, though hard at first, becomes easier over time. Reading and writing, on the other hand, are taught skills. Capturing sounds in a code (characters) and duplicating them takes a much longer time to master and perhaps a lifetime to perfect.

Readers sometimes think, okay, well let them start with the basics. So, meaning well, they hand you an elementary school book and tell you to start. I'll tell you from experience that taking out a double-line, colourful tracing book of letters, however well meaning, does not do well for self esteem. It's embarrassing enough not being able to recognise a letter, but it's doubly so sitting among your peers looking like you're a five-year-old

tracing letters. Thankfully, ALTA has its own workbooks for adults.

People who can't read don't try hard enough

'Just pick up a book and try!' We love to encourage students to 'just try' as if 'trying' is some magic word you say and suddenly a light bulb will go on and everything will make sense. Have you ever counted how many words are on a page? I'll tell you – plenty! (as we say in Trinidad). Sometimes you don't know where one word starts and another one ends. There is no greater frustration in the world. So you start small, letter by letter, and word by word. Before I came to Japan I decided to use the ALTA method of flashcards and sight words to learn Japanese kana (alphabet). It took months to recognise most moji on sight but now I can read a little, very slowly. Sometimes I get stuck, but I apply what ALTA has taught me. It takes more than trying, it takes a realistic and measurable method, over and over again.

Here in Japan, I need help to fill a form. I can't read my mail. I can't order from a restaurant without pictures on its menu. Does that make me stupid?

People who cannot read are slow/stupid/lazy/poor

Non-readers are no fools. Inside their heads are real, legitimate ideas. Some are businessmen and women

like us. Talk? They are among the best talkers around. Their arguments are at the tip of the tongue (so are the excuses). There is nothing slow there. Statements like "Wh'appen you cyah read!" or the words 'illiterate' and 'ignorant' are tossed around in verbal assaults all the time. Its intent: to make someone feel they don't quite measure up. It's something that stings, especially for someone who cannot read. Put pen and paper in front of a non-reader and his/her well of words dries up. All you hear is, "I cyah explain that!", or "I cyah spell that". Self-expression evaporates. The words become harder to grasp and in its place, a feeling of helplessness.

Here in Japan, there are many times I get that feeling. I need help to fill a form. I can't read my mail. I can't order from a restaurant without pictures on its menu. Does that make me stupid? I work twice as hard to get out the things I want to say. I still need to keep a job and take care of myself. Am I lazy? I want to know if the flier in my mailbox is an opportunity, a sale or an emergency notice. Do I have to be poor?

Have I managed to get by so far without being able to read and write, all this time? Definitely. People in Trinidad do it all the time. They rely on a support system of family, friends, co-workers and audio-visual media to help navigate this otherwise literate world. They fake it. Does it have to stay that way? Hopefully not.

I'm glad I got off the sidelines to walk a mile in the shoes of an ALTA student. You don't have to do the same, just be the change you want to see in T&T. Join ALTA today: volunteer, teach, sponsor-a-student or be a supportive employer.

The Men of ALTA

by Cedriann Martin

Cedriann Martin is the Communications Officer at the UNAIDS Caribbean Regional Support Team and looks forward to being an ALTA tutor in the future.

Trinidad and Tobago gets its education news through a gendered lens. Girls, we're told, topped the boys at the Secondary Entrance Assessment (SEA). There are vastly more women than men teaching primary school. Young men far outnumber their female counterparts in the Engineering faculty at the University of the West Indies. And on and on.



Darnley Gittens

So it isn't lost on the administrators at the Adult Literacy Tutors Association (ALTA) that more than 90 percent of their tutors are – you guessed it – female. A typical ALTA tutor training attracts about three dozen women, but only one or two men. But retired school supervisor, Darnley Gittens, remembers a time when teaching wasn't strictly a woman's work.

"Upon leaving secondary school I went to the Mausica Teachers' College. The intake annually was 110 people. Every year they took in 55 men and 55 ladies. This," he qualifies, "is 1966." During the ensuing years gender norms shifted. Today, many people think of teaching as a stereotypical caring profession. And they've increasingly come to think of teachers as women.

Thirty-six-year-old ALTA tutor, Andy Romero, explains that his experience in the classroom has challenged his own self-perception. "I didn't know myself before," he reflects. "I found out who I was here in ALTA. Society views me as being very dread... very cold... not understanding as a male. In ALTA it is totally different. I am one of the more understanding teachers." There's still a ring of surprise in his voice.



Andy Romero

Investment banker, Leslie St. Louis, comes from a long line of educators, but he only capitalised on his genetic gift for teaching a couple of years ago. In his mind the shortage of male role models is an issue for society at large.



Leslie St Louis

"Men tend to take on the role of provider and not necessarily of supporter and caregiver. It's an awareness issue. It requires a level of self-confidence as a man to feel you can help. Many men see their role in a very narrow way and they never reach the stage of consciousness of getting past the provider line," he says.



Carlyle Singh

Retired Holy Name Convent teacher, Carlyle Singh, applies the gender question to ALTA's students: "In the main, lots of males will not admit that they have this challenge. We do get more men coming to the class nowadays. Mind you, many of these same men might want the female touch once they get into the classroom, but ultimately the tone that is set is that everybody is equal and

everybody has come to learn, whether they have a male or a female talking to them."

For Frank Rivas gender per se is a non-issue. The real task is for more young men to contribute.

"I'd like to make a plea to young professional men. It's important for us to get involved in things like ALTA because it allows you to impact someone's life in a very positive, sometimes life-altering manner. There are not a lot

of opportunities in your life to do that," he insists. For the vast majority of these men, the decision to volunteer with ALTA arose from their deep desire to contribute to their communities; to express gratitude for their own opportunities and privileges.

"For me the decision was taken in the context of retirement...

not wanting to sit down at home and contemplate the sky, but to get out and do something that allows me to give back to the community. Interacting with the students and seeing them progress after one or two years brings an incredible personal satisfaction," reflects retired diplomat, Philip Sealy.

Ian Georges is the odd man out. He's matter-of-fact about

his less-than-altruistic motivation for starting tutoring at ALTA. As he neared age 60 he thought about taking on one of those gigs as an English language teacher in some faraway place. ALTA, he thought, would get his teaching shoes wet.

"At first it was driven by selfishness and personal motivation. I thought: Why not find out if you like it? You might help somebody in need as a by-product. Now I realise that I need ALTA more than ALTA needs me. It is unbelievably rewarding... the best investment I've ever made in my life. This is the first time in 30 years that I am actually doing something I really love," he reflects.

When asked what they've learned about themselves through the ALTA experience, the answer is almost unanimous: they didn't know what patient men they were.

All male teachers aren't the same, mind you. They have varying views on T&T's literacy challenge. For Gittens, who has had a life-long passion for serving the children whose special needs aren't obvious, the flaws are to be found in our education system.

"We have to ask whether there is something wrong with the students or something wrong with the school teachers. Even if you do not understand, you should feel as though the teachers are on your side. In schools, some of the teachers are not as dedicated as they could be. There are people who are not in it to help... they don't love their jobs and aren't concerned with whether or not it's done properly," he contends.

But for Georges the fault often lies with a society that does not sufficiently value education and support children's access. Some of his students share stories of having been, quite simply, kept away from school. Others opted not to go and didn't have adults insist.

"We want the smoking gun," he says "but the problem lies with us."

Whatever the origins of the problem, ALTA provides a solution to which all these men firmly subscribe. They're a motley crew in terms of age, professions and demeanours but there are a few points on which they are unanimous. First, volunteering for ALTA isn't just about a couple hours, a couple times each week. It requires an investment of time, energy and emotion. But it's all worth it. Many of their students move from strength to strength – some can read the paper; others can fill out their own passport forms; others still successfully complete School Leaving and Caribbean Examination Council examinations. There's something about the kind of person who would sign up for the ALTA challenge that combines with the philosophy and form of the programme to create committed, compassionate teachers...gender notwithstanding.



Ian Georges



Frank Rivas



Philip Sealy

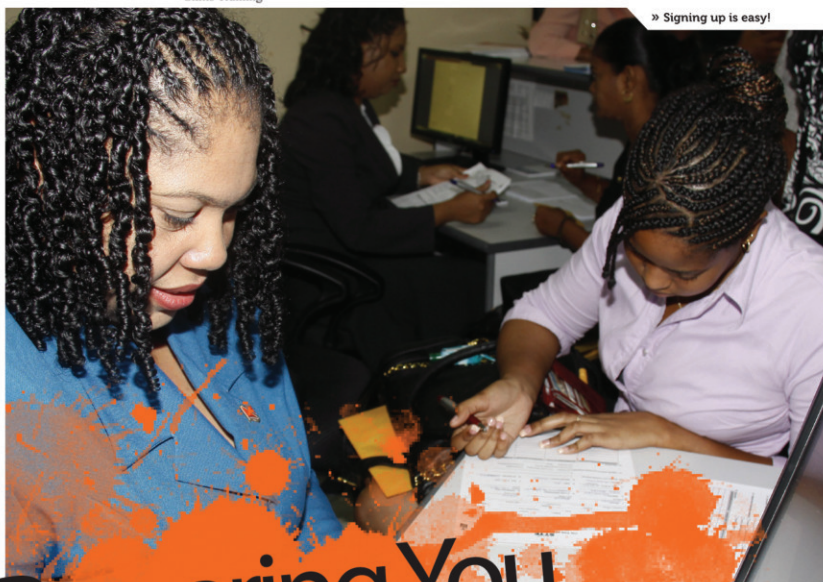


The On-the-Job Training (OJT) Programme of the National Training Agency

» A dilemma that many students face once examinations have ended is the issue of deciding what their next step ought to be. Alternatively, many students find that it is difficult to acquire a job, given that they have little or no experience. Students in these situations can take a look at the OJT Programme outlined below. It presents students with opportunities and provides them with experience.

A Look at the OJT Programme

» The OJT Programme is a pre-employment programme which prepares nationals of Trinidad and Tobago, ages 16-35 with the knowledge and skills required for their induction into the world of work. The programme was re-introduced under the National Training Agency (NTA) in February of 2011. Where the NTA is expected to develop and implement new strategies to reform, develop and rebrand the programme. It offers hands-on training where trainees gain experience in their particular fields of interest.



» Signing up is easy!

you should know

Preparing You For The World Of Work

what the OJT Programme can do for you

OJT PROGRAMME BENEFITS

There are many benefits associated with the OJT Programme for trainees. They have an opportunity to develop good quality work ethics, an ardent sense of dependability and relevant work experience. They also have the opportunity to obtain a Caribbean Vocational Qualification (CVQ) in their various skill areas. Some other benefits to trainees include: a monthly stipend and the chance to gain Life Skills Development Training.

PAYMENT LEVELS: STIPEND

Based on their academic qualifications, Trainees in the On-the-Job Programme receive a stipend as outlined:

Level 1: Persons with secondary education and qualifications up to the CXC level receive **\$2,000.00**

Level 2: Persons with CAPE, A 'levels, Associate Degrees or Technical level qualifications receive **\$3,000.00**

Level 3: Persons with Undergraduate Degrees receive **\$5,000.00**

Level 4: Persons with Post-graduate qualifications receive **\$6000.00**

All other levels of payment for educational achievement will be appropriately assessed

GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT

Overall, trainees are provided with career guidance and support. Additionally, resume writing guidance and interview preparation advice are provided. This programme is executed with employer/industry support, under the guidance of the National Training Agency, which is an agency of the Ministry of Tertiary Education and Skills Training. The OJT Programme continues to support trainees and their needs, working toward the development of a more employment-ready and certified workforce.

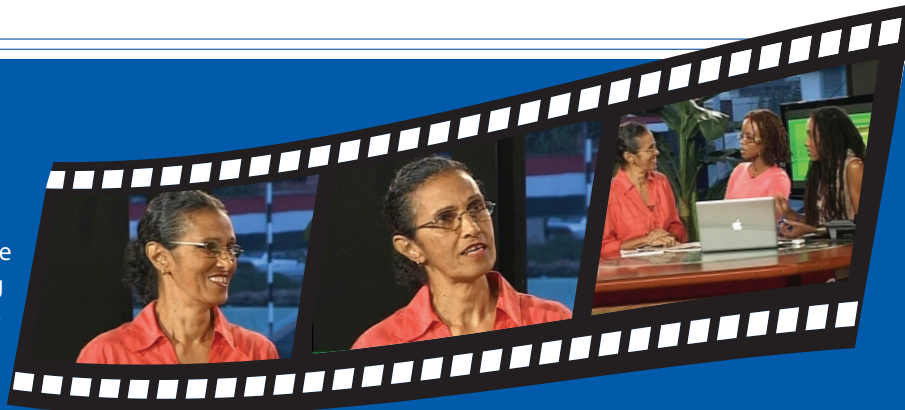


Humbled

by Jeanette Williams

I trained as an ALTA tutor in 2003 and it opened a whole new world. At that time I had no idea what teaching literacy entailed but the six-week training period left me in no doubt that this was going to be not just beneficial to others, but stimulating and exciting. I was not wrong.

Nine years on, I am still fuelled by Paula's passion for bringing the world of reading to others. In that time, I have taught three different levels in our community classes, in our workplace programme and at a drug rehabilitation facility. In all cases, I have been struck by the sincerity of the expressions of gratitude from the students. The trust they place in me is truly humbling. The lessons they teach me are life-giving. As a coordinator, I see yet other aspects of ALTA that make it successful – the symmetry of the programme itself, the teamwork of tutors and the incredibly well organised office that keeps things running. More recently, I have been involved in interviewing prospective tutors, helping to edit teaching material and being part of the training team. I am amused by friends who suggest that being an ALTA tutor is a good idea as it gives me something to do in my retirement. ALTA is not my hobby. It is a social movement to which I am committed.



ALTA Tutor faces the Camera: Jeanette Williams

Interview at Gayelle, 7th September 2010

Knowing that a lot of the students may be troubled, they have not had the best lives, why would you volunteer to put yourself in that situation?

Well, if I speak personally, I really was not aware that this was the kind of student that I would be meeting. I'd been a teacher all my life and, when I retired from teaching, I decided well let me go and train and make use of some of the teaching skills I have, and so I went to ALTA and I was trained as an ALTA tutor and when I went to the classroom and I started to meet people, then I realised how great this need was. To tell you the truth, it humbled me, it humbled me.

Now tell me about the challenges in the classroom, how is it different from teaching school-age children and how do you surmount those challenges?

It is very different. The classroom of the traditional school is very different from the ALTA classroom. We at ALTA are very well trained. We go through an intense period of training and the approach that ALTA uses is very user-friendly, and secondly we use what we call the Directed Discovery Method. So we don't lecture, we teach. What we do is we get the student to arrive at the right answer by using clues, questions and so on, so the approach is entirely different from

the typical classroom setting. And we're well, well trained for that.

And in the typical classroom setting the challenges might be a rude child, a noisy child. What are the challenges in this context?

We do get some challenges but of a very different nature. It's adults, so sometimes you might find that there is a conflict between two people. A personality conflict, it might be. I had a situation in a classroom where a man and a woman virtually were coming to fisticuffs. So you have to kind of get in there and calm the situation and let them know that look, we're here for a reason. Whatever personal grudges you have, don't bring it into the classroom and let's just focus on why we're here. But interestingly enough, many of our lessons are tailor-made in order to deal with many situations that could arise in a classroom. We have lessons that deal with things that are relevant to the adult, so we have things like different behaviour patterns, different things about alcoholism, all kinds of things, how to bring up a child.

Are you able to give students that one-on-one?

The ratio, the ALTA student-to-tutor ratio is eight to one but most of the time, we

have fewer than that, so that they do get individual attention, individual help.

You spoke a little bit about the challenges but are there moments where you have triumphs, big and small?

I suppose as in all teaching, there are. I would say moments of triumph outstrip the disappointments, or the challenges. For me, when students come to me and they say, "Thank you, miss. Thank you." That is enough, so whether they have been able to master the skills in reading and writing or not, it matters little. What is more important to me is how they feel about themselves and that they feel good about themselves. That they have tried and they know that the response they were getting from their tutors was one of encouragement and one of the things about ALTA, we never say no. That is not a word we use in ALTA. So if we know that an answer is wrong, we say, "Yes, let's look at it another way. How about if you look at it this way?" And that makes them feel that they're not stupid. They're not. They're not stupid at all. Some of the smartest people that I have taught have been ALTA students. Bright, bright, bright, bright. They just did not have the opportunity to learn to read and write.



Bois

by Judith Theodore
ALTA Tutor, Actress, Artist & Writer

Hip, hip bois!" The announcer shouted into the mike after the prayer which included an historical speech about the ancestors who fought in 1881. Then it flowed, no not blood, but water. A pipe burst in the ring and stopped the action that was about to explode in the gayelle.

Before that, Lambie was grumbling from the sideline: "But she not praying for the stickfighters, like she only remembering the ancestors, is the fighters that need protection."

"When ah dead, bury meh clothes. Ah don't want nobody to wear meh clothes," Anslem Douglas started to sing his calypso about stick fighting when the microphone went silent. He tried singing without the microphone, but gave up as the commotion prevented him from being heard. That was the end of his performance for the night. It was hard to believe that he travelled all the way to Princes Town to have the audience hear only two lines of his song.

"We cannot start the fighting, too much water and electricity wires here. The man with the key for the gate, open it. We need to fix this pipe," hollered a man who may have been another master of ceremonies or just a very concerned person. His call went on for some time. Eventually an aged man appeared with an old mop and bucket. It was obvious that the task was a challenge for this man and his mop, but he persevered. The water stopped flowing and he got assistance. Another man brought out a big piece of cloth and spread it to suck up the water that remained in the ring.

That was in places where they could still see the ring. During the delay, the drummers kept playing to entertain the crowd, some of whom had infiltrated the ring. It was difficult to get them all out to attend to the task of mopping.

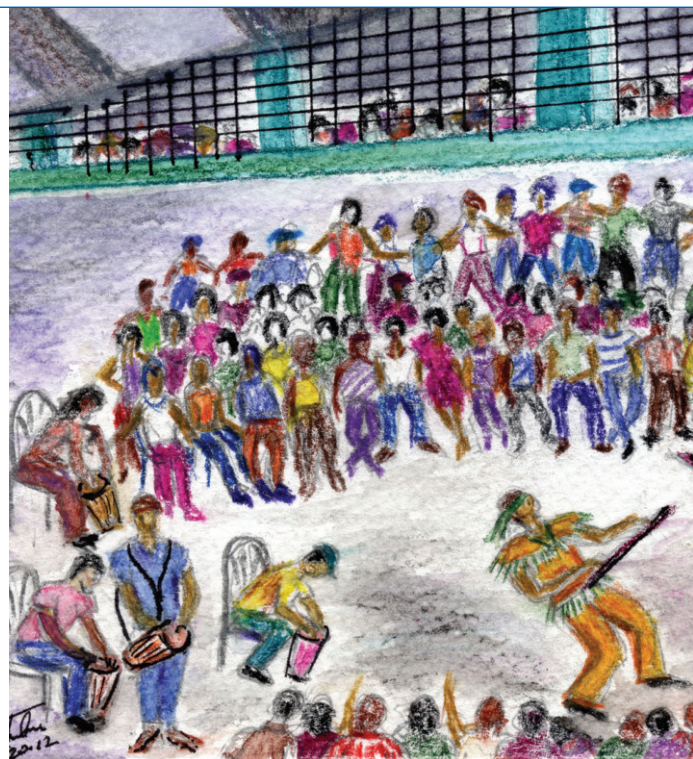
Boom ka tock tock, boom ka tock tock, a tamboo bamboo band started playing behind the crowd to the left and some of the people followed the sound and gathered around that band while they stomped their bamboo on the ground and beat metal with sticks for more rhythm. The infectious sound filled that section and they were pied pipers until the gayelle was dry enough for action.

Before the pipe burst, the crowd had maintained their seats while the drummers played and some stickfighters warmed up in the ring. The audience to the right of the ring sat stoically in their chairs. Those behind the judges were controlled by their respect for their position. The audience to the left of the ring was a more restless bunch. Drinks in the coolers of some were rapidly reducing but they kept their seats and smoked as they poked fun at each other. Many people who reached too late to get seats stood at the back eyeing chairs that were temporarily vacated by their occupants.

A man of East Indian descent offered two curvy ladies a space in front of him, suggesting that they could squeeze their chairs in. Those chairs had just been generously given to them by two gentlemen. His friend Pablo offered drinks to the ladies from their cooler. They politely refused. He spoke simultaneously with Spanish, Jamaican, and other unknown accents which amused those around him.

"I need to go to the bathroom, I don't want to wet myself," Pablo was repeating to no one in particular. Eventually he disappeared in the crowd.

Many eyes peered through the



iron railing above the high wall of the market. Those people on the outside had a better view of proceedings than many inside. It was said they caused the pipe to burst. The delay caused patrons to become restless and move out of their seats. By the time the ring was almost dry, some of the onlookers outside had rushed through the gate without paying. The place was now overcrowded with almost everyone standing on the chairs. Some stood two to a chair, some rested their feet on the back of one chair while balancing on another to see what action was about to start in the ring. One false move would send everyone down like a set of dominoes.

Pablo returned and shimmied up a pole and sat on a crossbeam close to a fluorescent light. He stretched out his legs along the beam and leaned against a wall for a bird's eye view. Now satisfied that he had the best seat in the house, he clapped in time with the drumming. The people below him did not feel as secure as he did with his seating accommodation and looked up occasionally for signs of slippage.

"We not starting until the ring clear. No room for the fighters. Clear the ring!" shouted Ghost from atop a chair close



to the ring. He was largely ignored. Then the woman who said the prayer, acting like the official master of ceremonies, took the microphone and repeated the statement more forcefully.

"Stop the drumming. Nothing will start here tonight if the ring is not cleared. Clear the ring!" she demanded.

A few people trickled out. The ring was still crowded. The woman, who was dressed in African attire, chided the patrons again, "You all know what they say about us. We can't do anything properly. Leave the ring please, so that we can proceed with the fighting. We have to demonstrate that we can run a proper show. We want to start now."

Gradually the crowd in the ring filtered out. The referee called the opposing teams to parade in the ring again. They sized up each other and zantayed around the ring and then left two combatants to engage in the first fight for the night. The two fighters

stalked each other around the ring.

Soon, sticks were swinging in the air. Arms were stretching and retreating to manoeuvre their weapons to land a blow on the opponent. Heads were bobbing and weaving to avoid connecting with the sticks. One landed on target - bois. Before the referee noticed, blood was oozing from a cut on the recipient's forehead. A drop fell on the heart-shaped mirror that adorned the front of his costume. It trickled to the swan's down surrounding the mirror. Another drop fell on his shoe as he swung his head. The referee blew his whistle to call off the fight. The combatants embraced and the crowd parted for them to exit the ring. The spectators screamed and shouted with excitement. First blood shed for the night. It wouldn't be the last.

"Come out in the road. Come out in the road, warrior," the drummers chanted as they beckoned the next pair of fighters.

So You Think You Know Phonics?

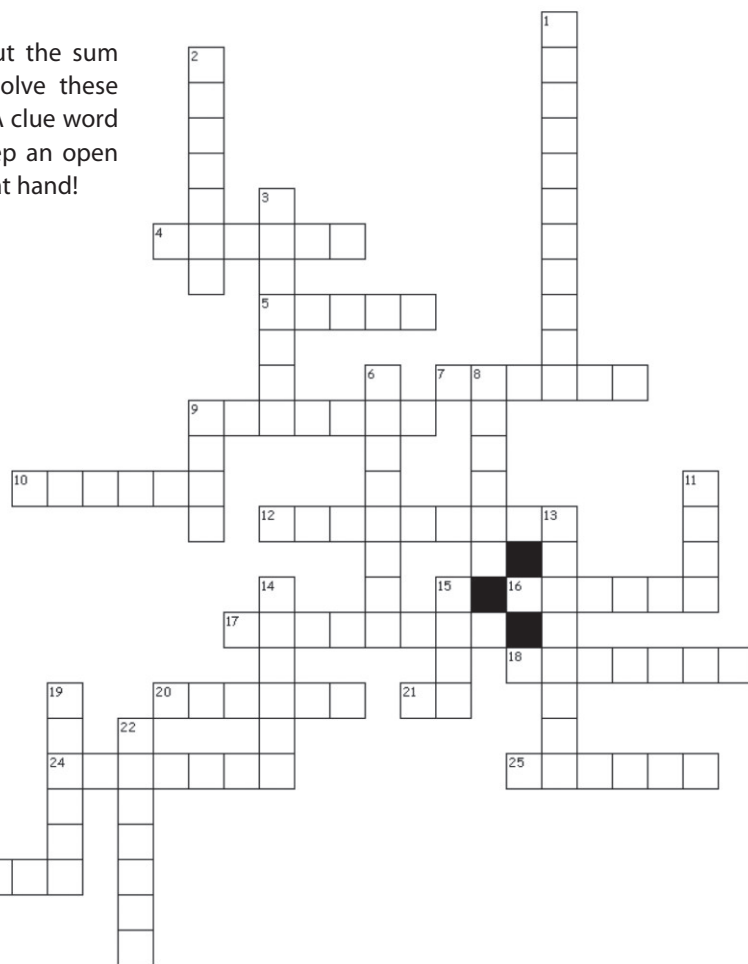
A word is nothing but the sum total of its sounds. To solve these clues, you need to say an ALTA clue word and then its matching sound. Keep an open mind and your sense of humour close at hand!

Across

4. Pretty flower fast asleep (2)
5. Paddle down river in Italy (2)
7. Perfumes, colognes etc. (1)
9. Ask knight to sound like cat (2)
10. Kathy's nickname squared
12. Alternative trip with Logie (3)
16. Farewell to Greek letter (2)
17. Maracas stringer shriek (3)
18. Got energy? No way!
20. Ask about health of female pig (2)
21. Friendly alien from out of space (2)
24. Local cricket ground sinks (2)
25. Charge for vital oriental energy (2)
26. Round of applause for atmosphere (2)

Down

1. Avoid Grand Central (2)
2. Also took wings (2)
3. Fruity otic device (2)
6. Martini liquor with gavel (2)
8. Enthusiastic response of Bovine (2)
9. First letter gets salary (2)
11. Rasta first person (3)
13. Horsy sound for singer Charles (2)



Answers: Across: 4. rose ZZ; 5. row Poy; 7. scents; 9. purr sir; 10. Kay Kay; 12. or Gus tour; 16. by chit; 17. bay bee bee; 18. pop up uh; 20. how how; 21. ET; 24. oval low; 25. chit hee; 26. cheer air
Down: 1. station shunt; 2. flew too; 3. pear ear; 6. gin judge; 8. cow wow; 9. pay a; 11. Ian I; 13. Ray neigh; 14. oat sew; 15. tent; 19. blower; 22. bare ear; 23. night eye

First day of ALTA tutor training at Maximum Security Prison



FACTS & STATS

Prisons

- No literacy statistics for T&T prisons.
- The US National Institute for Literacy estimates 70% of the US prison population can't read.

Workforce

- September 2003: 13,000 applicants sat a 138-word dictation for the Special Reserve Police exam.
Failure rates:
50% (POS, West, North East and North divisions)
85% (Southern division)

Schools (non-private)

- 2000: Universal secondary education introduced.
First three years: 9,756 students started Form 1 with SEA scores 0-30%.
Some schools had remedial teachers, usually primary school teachers who repeated at secondary school what had not worked at primary school.
- Mid-2012: Secondary schools – No specialist literacy teachers on staff or structured literacy programme.
Primary schools – Classroom teacher expected to address all literacy needs.
Teachers who have special training have to 'find the time to help' children with special needs.

ALTA Contract Branch

- Offers the ALTA programme (taught by tutors selected for their experience and competence) to NGOs, workplaces and government programmes to bring literacy to those not served by ALTA's free community classes.

ALTA in Prisons

► 97 Steps

by Paula Lucie-Smith

In 1998, Prison Officer Rudolph Garcia climbed the three flights of stairs to ALTA's Cummins Lane office pleading to be trained as a tutor so he could teach the inmates on Carrera to read. Written correspondence was the inmates' only communication with those outside the island. Visits meant a boat and then a van to Frederick St, so these were rare. Garcia trained, started teaching, then was transferred to Frederick Street.

There his duties did not allow him to teach, so he paved the way for ALTA volunteers to come in twice weekly to teach. Then he was transferred to Maximum Security Prison (MSP). Soon MSP officers were attending ALTA training, but we realised that their shift work made scheduling almost impossible. Also, the disciplining role of prison officer does not always mesh with the nurturing role of teacher.

Innovative thinking was called for. Why not train the literate inmates to teach the not-so-literate ones? After all, as Garcia often says, "Everybody in here has time." To prove his point he asks a series of men, "How much time you have?" Every man answers down to the day. "Nine years, two months and six days, Sir." Garcia flashes his trademark grin, "See! What I tell you Paula. They all have time."

Carrera was the prison in most need, so at 7am on a clear dry season morning, three ALTA trainers waited patiently at Hart's Cut for the captain to start the vessel. Its name was painted boldly, Rehab. There had been two vessels, but the Reform sank. Sometime after 8am, we boarded with the officers and assorted religious ministers. Leaving plumes of smoke in our wake, we arrived at the island – and faced the 97 steps. The scene was much like a Clint Eastwood Western – scores of men clad in navy drill, barefoot or with slippers made from discarded car tires, trudging up the winding stairs laden with items from the mainland. Most carry containers of water, as the island has no supply of fresh water.

A plus is that for once we had more than enough help to carry the training paraphernalia. We approached the climb with hands swinging. We paused at step 59 to take in the spectacular view – really to catch our breath – as inmates passed us on their second lap. The gate loomed and 500 male eyes swivelled in our direction. Fifteen inmates and Officer Randolph Grant (who is still trying to keep ALTA going at Carrera) waited to



ALTA Coordinator Janice Ferreira at an ALTA class on Carrera

be trained as ALTA tutors in the cramped library, which houses mainly out-of-date school texts and encyclopedias. There were challenges: the sweltering heat, not helped by our required neck to ankle clothing; the fact that some inmates training to be tutors should really have been students; and the rushed call to pack up and leave when the 2 pm boat was ready to sail, which could be anytime from noon onwards. Never ask why

someone is in here. The first and only time I made this mistake and asked an officer what the baby-faced youth could have done, the reply was, "Kill a teacher. Manslaughter."

ALTA started at Carrera in 2001. Garcia spread the word, and in 2002 ALTA conducted two tutor-training courses at MSP with inmate volunteers from MSP, Carrera and Golden Grove Prisons (GGP), for men and for women. In 2002, 58 trained volunteer ALTA inmate-tutors were teaching the non-literate inmates to read and write. ALTA secured funding from the British High Commission, Inter-American Development Bank, Caribbean Money Market Brokers, Community Development Fund and Imjin Security for the first three years up to 2004.

With a track record of success, we aimed to embed literacy within the new thrust towards rehabilitation. But our efforts followed a disheartening pattern: Send ALTA proposal and budget; call every prison contact every day until exhaustion sets in and the programme grinds to a halt. Then, a call is received saying something like, "How come you all didn't pick up this cheque here long time?" Cheques in 2005, 2007 and 2009 resuscitated the programme, but the effort involved in starting over from scratch three times has left all concerned dispirited...but not yet defeated. After an encouraging meeting with the then newly-appointed Commissioner of Prisons Martin Martinez, we submitted a new plan in April 2012 to deal with the many obstacles to smooth implementation of inmate-taught ALTA instruction.

Like the inmates, the ALTA prison programme has many steps to climb and time that stretches on with little to account for its passage. Occasionally a message comes to ALTA that we have abandoned the inmate tutors. Garcia has retired, so who will take ALTA into prison now?

Changes seem to be underway in the prison system. The prisons have just been transferred to the Ministry of Justice – a good word... 'justice'.

► Kilos of Cocaine and Blue Soap Roses

by Wendy Voss

In any teaching situation the student is at least as important as the material being taught. When teaching adults whose lives have left them profoundly damaged, the search to find a specific way to teach each individual becomes even more important. Commonly when a new inmate comes to class, he is unable to meet the eye of the teacher and it takes weeks of patiently including the new student before finally his face lights up at some particularly resonant reference. Very few inmates have learning difficulties; almost all have had broken schooling and most have been ridiculed for mistakes made and facts unknown.

Trini humour inevitably shines through. Gerard is a man of about 30 who used drugs for years and sits smiling benignly in the corner of the class, always willing but unable to write more than his name after much trying. One day the phonic (k) is being taught. The teacher explains the two letters which can make the same sound and gives examples including the word "kilo".

Gerard's eyes light up for the first time! "Miss! Like in kilos of cocaine!"

"Gerard, I couldn't have come up with a better example myself!"

Another day, the sentence 'The drunk man fell off the wall.' is used. The prison officer who attends the class says to one inmate, "That ever happen to you, boy?"

"Tired do dat," is the response.

Through years of teaching in the prisons, the gifts and appreciation from men who have found that

they can learn have been amazing: an entire bunch of roses made from blue soap, a beautifully crafted single rose from wire and toilet paper and countless cards and illustrated poems.

The real reward is the day that the student can look the teacher in the eye, smile and show that he is ready to learn.



An ALTA class in session at Carrera prisons coordinated by Wendy Voss

► Letters

by Marlon Phillip, Inmate Student

I was influenced to come to class because I was not able to read and write, and every time I get a letter I had to let another inmate read it for me. Every time we get away, he tell me that I am 'duncy' and a 'stupidy'. It had a next person in my cell who came to school and was just like me, and now he can read and write and that is what influenced me to come to class.

I have learnt a lot and I am still learning and I am very thankful for the ALTA Programme for helping me to be able to read and write and spell. Now that I came to class, I can do my own writing and spelling and I can read anything I get from anyone.

► A Prisoner's Cry

by Junior Alexander, Volunteer Inmate Tutor

I came into prison at the age of 34, being a recidivist, never having the thought of what tomorrow may bring. I had been warned on several occasions about the fast lane, but took no heed, doing my own thing I was found guilty and sentenced to 35 years and to receive 20 strokes with the birch.

Since my incarceration, I am facing humiliation, inhumane, degrading treatment and punishment by my peers. It is now 18 years I am in prison, crying day and night in my heart to be set free. I even ask myself sometimes, "Where is home? Who I am going to?" All these years behind these walls, many have passed away, all close to my heart, next of kin as we would say. I have written many letters seeking advice, even asked orally many competent sources, but all my cries went unheard.

Heaven, what should I do to be given a second chance to return to society? To live a normal life, why can't I be given that second chance? But all my cries are falling on deaf ears. "Yes"! It is I to blame, not society, not the government, no one owes me nothing. I stand accused all alone and cold. I am just sitting here, surrounded by these grey walls in solitude, asking myself, "Why? Why?"

I am 52, awaiting another 11½ years, hoping that God will send an angel to rescue me from the jaws of death, because to die in prison is to die in shame. It means dying alone and cold with the greyness of an empty atmosphere, for to us there is no love behind prison walls, unless your focus is on God not man. So please I beg you people of tomorrow, take heed, for this is a living testimony coming from a heart of stone, now a heart of flesh. Be an asset to your community and the society and not a tenant in our nation's prisons. Do good today and avoid my sorrows. It concerns you.

► Walking

by H. Villaruel,
Volunteer Inmate Tutor

I was walking,
There were many places to go.
I was walking to
places that I've known.

Where familiar faces filled
the spaces of the day,
Where the smiles of loved
ones never go away.

I continue walking.
There are many places to go.
I am walking to places
that I know.

Where the praises of birds
fell on deaf ears.
Flowers displayed their splendor,
but there was not a care.

So I'm still walking,
So many places to go.
And I'm walking,
To places I want to know.

Where advice is given but
no one hears,
Where war is loved and
peace, feared.

Now I've stopped walking,
No more places to go.
No more walking,
To places that I know.

Here confinement fills the
spaces of the day,
And the time never seems
to go away.

So, again, I start walking,
Visions offer lots of places to go.
And I'll be walking,
To places that I know.

Walking to loved ones.
Where hugs and smiles exist.
Where the praises of birds are bliss.

Where advice would gladly
be accepted,
Where mistakes would never
be repeated.

I am walking.

► Freeing prisoners with literacy

by Erline Andrews

When Minister of National Security Russell Huggins visited the Carrera Island Prison almost two decades ago – an extremely rare occurrence that racked the nerves of prison officials – in preparing for the occasion, prison officers tried to stop the practice among the inmates of sneaking 'bucket baths' at various corners of the prison. Officers put up signs at the usual places. They read, 'No bathing.'

Prison officer Rudolph Garcia had been assigned to lead Huggins and his entourage on a tour of the prison. The group had just set off and turned a corner when they came upon an inmate, naked, bathing from a bucket right under a "No bathing" sign.

"Needless to say, everybody was real embarrassed," said Garcia, now retired, as he sat on a park bench atop San Fernando Hill earlier this year recalling the visit. He's a big, friendly man with a big grin, but it's easy to imagine him being tough when necessary. He'd approached the inmate.

"I said, 'Read that sign there.' He watch up, he said, 'Eh?'" Garcia's voice lowered and took on a hint of the shock he'd felt as he'd made a realisation. "He can't read." Garcia recalled the words he said later to the prison superintendent. "I said, 'Boss, we have a problem.'"

It was not the first time Garcia – who went on to found the prison's literacy programme – had noticed the problem.

Shortly after he joined the prison service, he surprised one inmate – a former police officer convicted of fraud – with a frisk after noticing that the man's clothes looked bulky. He found on the man around 300 letter forms – which inmates used for all written communication.

"Why are you writing letters for these men," Garcia asked. The inmate responded: "They ask me to do it ... you know how it does be."

Garcia took his concerns to the superintendent, who suggested that the prison conduct an assessment of inmate literacy.



Rudolph Garcia

It was no easy task and required that the officers conducting it stay overnight at the prison.

"When we did the assessment, out of 600 and change prisoners, about 500 couldn't read and write," said Garcia. "They were not functionally literate, and that was alarming."

Rudolph Garcia was born in Palo Seco, grew up in Oropouche and later moved to San Fernando. He joined the prison service not out of passion but because it was a good, clean way for a young working-class man of his generation to earn a decent living. He'd applied to all the security services; and prison was the first to call. But once he got in he was determined to do his best and make a difference. Carrera Prison's overwhelming literacy problem gave him an opportunity to do this.

He began conducting classes – about 90 inmate students at a time – under a large tree in the prison yard. He had the men stand in semi-circles as he tried to teach them the words they would need to use to write a letter: "Dear Mom," "I'm all right." Garcia's first attempts went nowhere.

"I couldn't reach them," he said, remembered frustration creeping into his voice.

The superintendent gave him permission to seek outside help. Someone recommended ALTA, which was then a new organisation. Garcia visited ALTA's office in the Queen's Park Hotel and introduced himself to founder Paula Lucie-Smith.



"I told her who I was, and she watched the other person who was around, and she said, 'God answers prayers,'" Garcia recalled.

Amazingly, Garcia had turned up at a point when Lucie-Smith had been trying unsuccessfully to get the ALTA programme into the prison system and was in the midst of training new tutors. Garcia joined the training session and realised just how much he didn't know about conducting a literacy class.

"Listening to them, I said, 'Lord, how I getting that over!'" said Garcia. The training and ALTA's new-found support made a big difference.

"I went back in fully charged," said Garcia. But one man alone could not meet the need, so the idea of training inmate tutors was born.

"That was a strength within itself," said Garcia. Becoming a tutor boosted inmate morale, and inmate students more easily identified with, and therefore responded to, inmate tutors.

Garcia was soon transferred to the Port-of-Spain prison, then the Maximum Security prison, and paved the way for ALTA at both places.

He said the prison literacy programme has gone "from strength to strength", but challenges remain. Major among them was the refusal of many officers to buy into the idea of educating prisoners. Garcia said he's been derided as a "prisoner lover".

It's also difficult – as it is with non-incarcerated students – to get inmates to stick with the programme. Garcia has used both soft (persuasion) and hard (his authority as a prison officer) means to get inmates to come to class regularly.

But the struggle has been worthwhile. Garcia has many stories that illustrate this, including the one about the inmate student he compares to Cowboy X, the Sesame Street character that "left his mark everywhere".

"He was so ecstatic when he could write his name," Garcia recalled. "Everywhere this man pass he used to write his name with stone." Garcia was pleased by this particular display of prisoner graffiti. It validated the years of commitment and hard work he'd put into boosting literacy among prisoners.

"It's a labour of love," he said.

ALTA in the Workplace

► Knock, Knock, Knocking...

by Paula Lucie-Smith & Arlene Wallace Romero

Computers have transformed the workplace. The mechanic at a service centre has to read a computer-generated analysis of the engine rather than listen to its hum. The stores clerk who knew every item by shape, size, colour and location now has to pick the item out from a computer listing and type in items. No dictating letters to the secretary; these are done yourself on email. Rather than walk and talk to co-workers or meet to discuss issues, emails circulate on the office intranet. Then there's the new emphasis on safety, which requires signs at every turn and hefty safety manuals. Moreover the increasingly rapid rate of change means that new reading appears almost as the poor reader has figured out a way to get around yesterday's reading.

In 1998, recognizing that almost all students coming to ALTA classes had jobs and that the job often hindered punctuality and regular attendance, ALTA thought to bring literacy instruction to the workplace. CESO (Canadian Executive Services Overseas) advisor Kaye Grose conducted two Easter Workplace Literacy Courses to train ALTA tutors in customizing the programme to meet workplace needs via flexible scheduling and inclusion of work-based material.

A needs assessment is the first step to literacy instruction to the workplace. This involves employee orientation conducted by the company and ALTA, jointly or separately. For groups greater than 20 persons, the next step is an initial literacy screening conducted by ALTA-trained tutors. For fewer than 20, ALTA moves right away to the next step – one-on-one assessments of each employee's literacy level.

The employers and employees determine the frequency and timing of teaching sessions based on their work schedules. Intensive instruction produces quicker results and is a good option during down time. Queen's Hall used the period of rebuilding to run a literacy course for employees. At the end of the programme, Manager Heather Henderson Gordon wrote commending ALTA and the tutor, Paula Campbell, "on her total sense of commitment, confidentiality and ability to motivate the trainees."

The employer chooses the location for tuition, either on-site or off-site. Experienced ALTA tutors supplement the ALTA workbooks with materials from the work environment and modify the programme to meet the needs of the organization and employees. In addition to literacy instruction, ALTA can



Cheryl, Arlene and Marilyn in the ALTA library planning the workplace programme

specifically address spelling through the newly-developed ALTA Spelling Programme.

The benefits are many. Communication, relationships and adherence to policies and procedures are improved, which can impact positively on profit. Job creation is good for the economy generally and for the tutors in particular, while every NGO dreams of sustainable income generation to support its charitable work.

Unfortunately the obstacles are also many. Unlike the community classes, this is not a free service. Literacy takes time and time costs money. Finding a schedule that suits everyone can be challenging, especially in companies that operate 24/7. Interruptions mean instruction paid for is not received by all. This ranges from an employee stepping out of class to address an urgent matter to a month's absence on vacation or other leave. Workers may fear that they will lose their jobs if they reveal their literacy weaknesses, so refuse assessment or instruction. There are difficulties, but all surmountable with the will to do so.

When you think we are a literate nation, you miss the signs of low literacy and attribute these to laziness or incompetence: accidents when safety procedures are ignored; sketchy reports that do not provide the detail needed for decision making; damage to equipment because nearby printed instructions are not followed; good employees turning down training opportunities and even promotions; high turnover and absenteeism as employees duck reading and writing situations. Consequently, co-workers are constantly training replacements or accepting additional responsibilities to meet quotas or deadlines.

When you discover a worker who has literacy difficulties and 'let him go', where do you look for his replacement? You go to the same pool where 55% are not at newspaper reading level. Consider then whether, despite the obstacles, it may be

cost effective to keep the employee who already knows the job and provide literacy instruction in the workplace.

► **Joseph Dyer, Graduate of first workplace programme, Nucor Iron Carbide 1996**

"It helped me to understand how words are formed and the breaking up of words. I feel more comfortable with myself now. I meet more educated people every day and I don't feel lower than them. I am no longer afraid of promotion. I am now the Shop Steward of the union. I speak well and after each meeting I write reports. The only thing I can't do yet is type it up on the computer, but I buy one and am learning that too. I have the confidence to try new things."

► **Lystra Hazarie, Automotive Components Limited, 2001**

Nine male employees completed the programme at classes held from 2-4 p.m. at the intersection of the morning and afternoon shifts.

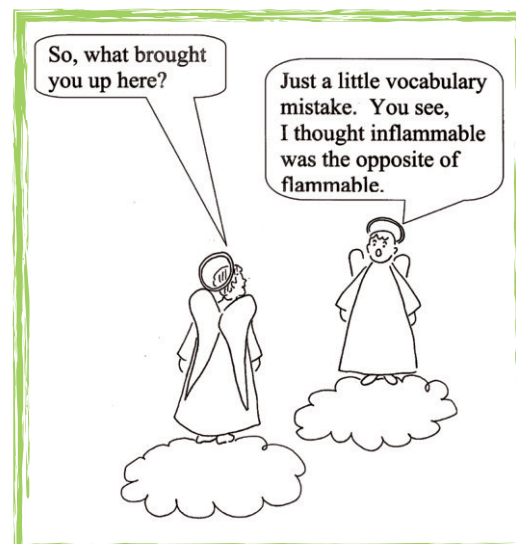
As part of their literacy instruction, these employees had the opportunity to explore each other's work area by bringing in and explaining to the class the forms they were required to use in their department. They practised filling in the forms, developing speed and competence. Level 1 and Level 2 students collaborated to produce a practical 10-page handbook entitled 'Safety on the Job: It's up to You and Me'.

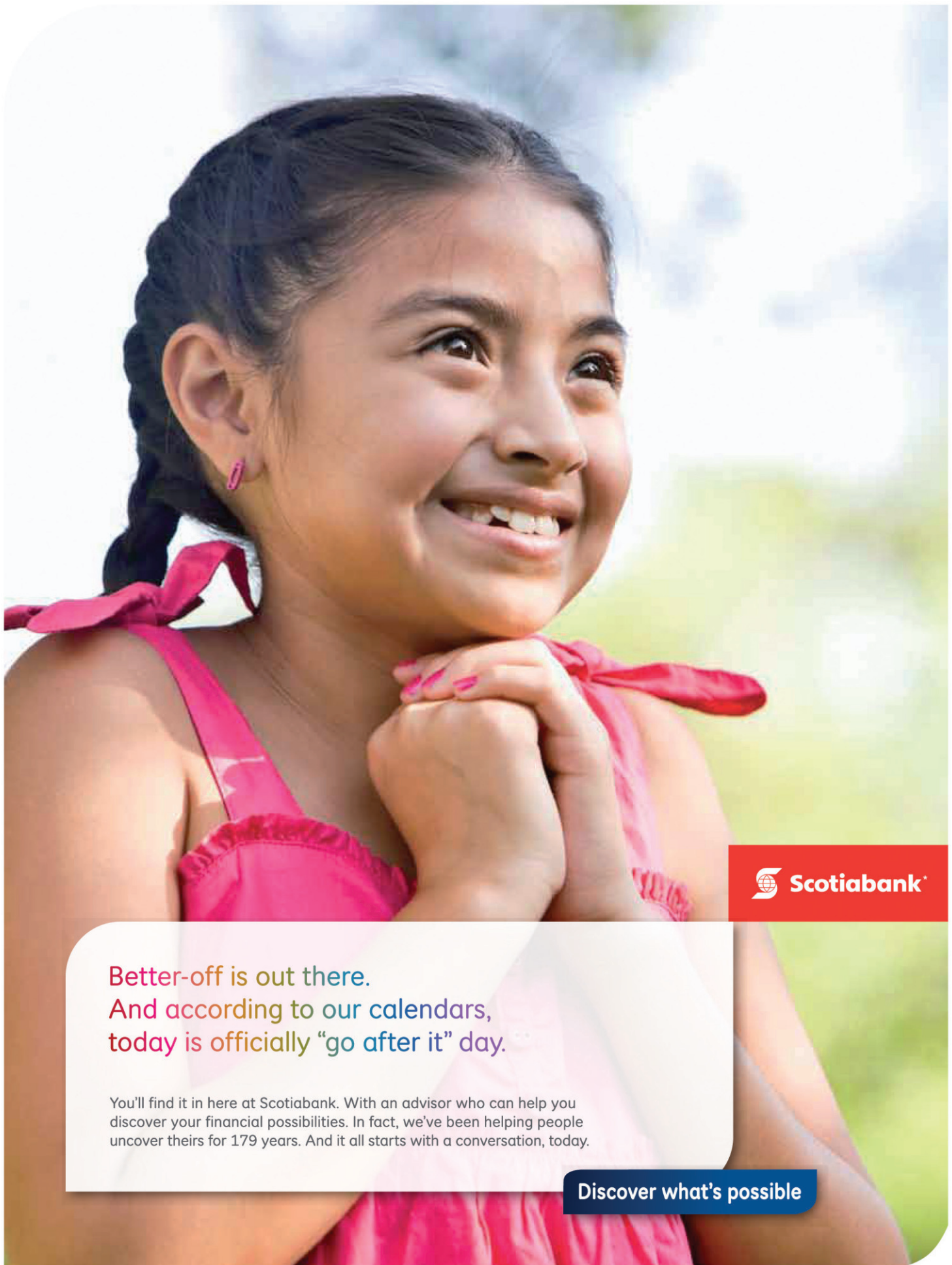
► **Cheryl Thurab-Prince, ArcelorMittal, 2007**

Four Level 1 and three Level 2 students attended on-site classes two days per week for four hours per day.

The employees' work schedule was adjusted to allow for this and attendance was excellent except for one person who came late. All the students were keen about the classes, with the Level 2 students going on to complete Level 3.

This programme worked well because it was supported by all stakeholders. The students were not interrupted during classes and were always given time to attend. As a result of their exposure to the classes, the students' confidence grew. While attending the class, one student passed his written and practical driving tests.





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ALTA in Schools

► Here Today, Gone Tomorrow

by Paula Lucie-Smith

ALTA has a stop-and-start history in schools. It started well. Soon after ALTA published its first literacy workbook in 1994, the Chief Education Officer Kenrick Seepersad ordered 5,000 books and contracted ALTA to train Junior Secondary School teachers. This is when I realised that training has little or no impact without an implementation plan.

The sudden introduction of universal secondary education in 2000 coincided with ALTA moving to Belmont – and Belmont has a lot of schools. Our literacy sign became a magnet for teachers asking for help to get their students reading and writing. In response, ALTA designed the Belmont Project.

We secured oral approval from the Chief Education Officer Dr Janet Stanley Marcano and funding from Amoco and the Embassy of Japan to cover all costs. Learning from the past, ALTA met beforehand with principals and schools were only included once they signed a written agreement to timetable at least four hours of ALTA instruction per week, the minimum required to complete a literacy level in an academic year. Taking no chances, we assigned an ALTA coordinator to visit each school to guide implementation and the teachers.

Of the 42 primary and secondary school teachers trained, nine teachers introduced ALTA teaching in their schools and only Melville Memorial Anglican and Gloster Lodge Moravian primary schools stuck to the agreed plan. Gloster Lodge continued for three years until funding ran out for the books. Melville Memorial persevered even then, buying the ALTA books and also running an evening ALTA programme for parents. Principal Rosemary Grant arranged for ALTA-trained staff member Loveday Arthur to teach ALTA full time. Mrs Grant's promotion to School Supervisor was followed by a succession of staff losses creating unfilled positions, so Loveday returned to the regular classroom. The ALTA interlude in Belmont schools came to an end.

In 2006 St. Augustine Senior Comprehensive, where I began my teaching career, invited ALTA in. They got Ministry of Education approval for the ALTA plan to add a foundation year for students who could not cope with a CSEC curriculum. The aim was to complete two ALTA literacy levels to bring students to at least Level 2, functional reading and writing. To work with the remedial teacher, the Rotary Club of St Augustine sponsored an ALTA teacher for two terms and school funds supported the last term. The room allocated was small, so students were wall to wall. Fortunately the ALTA tutor was very slim! The room had been used for photography, so had no windows. Hit and miss wiring meant that the air-conditioner



*Louis Amora
tutoring students*

seldom worked and added excitement as the room could be plunged into utter darkness at no notice. 18 teenaged boys and girls in the dark. Often the room was locked. Sometimes the key could be found; sometimes students and the two tutors went walkabout in search of a vacant room; sometimes they were lucky; sometimes some students did not return from walkabout. In the first two months, there was no ALTA instruction during 25 of the timetabled periods due to acts of God like flooding and earthquake, but more often to acts of man like Divali celebrations running late and school counsellor visits.

Surprisingly, the students made progress. Less surprising was the decision of the Ministry of Education to replace ALTA with an 'integrated literacy programme'. Maybe this was introduced and I just never heard about it.

BPTT sponsored ALTA teachers in Mayaro Composite and Guayaguayare High for three years (Sept 2005-July 2008), but just when Form 4 students had asked to be in ALTA, a letter from the Ministry of Education advised, "...our assessment has already been arranged for students of Form 1. The ALTA programme therefore will not be required for students."

We still get requests from schools, but approach these with caution as the outlay of time and resources has not brought equivalent literacy gains. Our proposal for a St Augustine-type Form 1 foundation year for students who have low SEA scores caught the Minister's eye briefly, but after more than a year, his gaze seems fixed elsewhere. In 2012, the persistence of the teachers and principal at Union Claxton Bay Secondary persuaded ALTA to try again and two ALTA tutors were contracted to teach an intensive programme from January to June. Before beginning the project, the Department of Educational Research and Evaluation met with us to get full details and to inform of their pre-test and a post-test to evaluate the programme. The ALTA tutors only noticed a mid-test. We await the DERE findings.

Bring in the Special Forces

Following ALTA's recently concluded literacy programme at the Union Claxton Bay Secondary School, tutors Louis Amora and Deborah O'Neil, along with coordinator Carla Mohammed, looked back at the novel experience.

Although two of us, Carla and Louis, are former school teachers, like Deborah, we had not previously delivered ALTA's programme to school children in their classrooms. Teaching young teens who, although struggling with reading and writing, felt stigmatised to be singled out for remedial classes, was far more demanding than teaching adults who voluntarily want to improve their literacy skills. The children, unlike adult learners who are focused and settled, had extremely short attention spans. Their interactions with us and each other often required intervention in order to modify their behaviour.

We soon realised that in order to achieve any element of success, we had to pick the battles we would fight. Our charges, especially the boys of Level 2, presented us with a variety of challenges. It was time to bring out the heavy ammunition, the battle was on! We called up our troops: Generous Praise, Loving Encouragement, Caring Concern, Positive Feedback and Firm Discipline and attacked with full force.

Slowly but surely, indiscipline, disruptive behaviour, fractiousness and non-participation began to retreat. We smiled triumphantly, but secretly, as we saw Eagerness, Self Confidence, Respect, Pride, and Commitment to Learning come to the front line. We graciously embraced them.

Did we resolve all the behaviour-management issues that plagued our students? Certainly not! However, by first addressing our students' emotional health and well-being we were able to break down some of the barriers to learning. As our students began to feel accepted, respected and valued, they, in turn, began to accept, respect and value us and the assistance we offered.

We ended our assignment with mixed feelings – gratitude that the programme had made a positive impact, with significant improvement, in the children's literacy skills; and regret that the resources needed for follow-up and continued growth may not be readily available to those who are still in need of one-on-one attention.

ALTA in Libraries

▶ Youth Lit Shines

by Paula Lucie-Smith

After observing that a significant number of young people were approaching librarians for help with their reading, Annette Wallace, then Executive Director of NALIS, proposed that a literacy programme be implemented through the national library system. Due to the specialised skill required to deliver a programme of this nature, she approached ALTA to be the executing partner in her vision.

The result was the 2008 launch of NALIS Youth Lit to provide effective literacy instruction to school students aged 16 and under whose literacy needs are not being addressed. The after-school programme for ages 9-11 (Standard 4) or 12-15 (Form 1 or 2) attracted great interest, but numbers were limited by the small size of available space and the ALTA ratio of no more than eight students per teacher.

The programme was so well received that in its second year, Youth Lit was extended to the four other libraries able to accommodate a class and has continued since in all but one of the eleven libraries. At the close of the annual evaluation session in July, staff from participating libraries reported evidence of positive impact at school, with one student moving from a failing grade to B+.

Diane Simeon, Director Public Libraries, commented, "The core business

▶ Once a Struggling Reader... Adrian Discovers the World of Words

by Sarah Williams, *The Student Press*, Sept 2009

Adrian Huggins does not suffer the usual awkwardness of adolescence. Neither does he mask it with bravado. His thick eyelashes and endearing smile would make him an unsurprising hit with the ladies – if he wanted to be – except he only has eyes for a girl who only has eyes for books and he himself is only just learning to read.

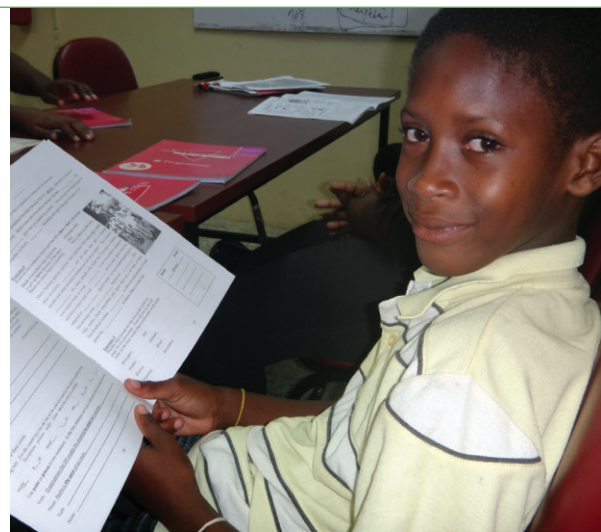
He'd been jolted by a mental picture painted for him and he didn't like its implication: "Imagine one day you're going to a restaurant with a girl, and you go to open the door for her. It says 'Push' but you're struggling, pulling the door to open," his mom said one day during one of their 'talks'. It was an embarrassing scene he never hoped to play out in reality, and his mother knew it was the scene she had to paint for him to understand his literacy challenges.

His mom's message had an added punch when he thought of his Bishop Anstey High School girlfriend, and how his reading problem could likely impact their relationship. From text messaging and Facebook chat, to love notes, poetry and Hallmark cards, he was determined to learn to read.

"He sent me texts at first. Yes, there was wrong spelling but you think,



Youth Lit graduates of the St. James Public Library are all smiles in self-made caps



Youth Lit student at work

of libraries is to promote reading, but just offering services is not enough. We have to get people reading. Youth Lit is our signature programme to do this and we could only have done this with ALTA, whose tutors have the capacity to teach these special skills and the patience to do this!"

In the academic year October 2011-July 2012, 125 students were taught by 14 contract ALTA tutors at 10 public libraries. In mid-June when the programme closed, certificates were awarded to three Beginners, 33 Level 1 and 26 Level 2 students.

At the POS Youth Lit graduation Shekeil Williams read the following, declaring proudly at the end, "and I wrote it by myself": "I found that the course was helpful for my reading, in the way I speak to others, and how I replied to questions, so that I would be more easily understood. The programme has also helped in the way I looked at life. Before, I was not certain about the career I could follow, but now, that my reading level has improved, I feel that I can prepare myself for higher and more interesting jobs. This course has opened some doors in my life."



Adrian & his girlfriend

you know, we don't always spell words the way they are when we texting anyway," the aspiring doctor shared. She said she did not have any idea about his reading problem but realised he didn't seem as interested in books.

"One time, I gave him a book to read. It was a literature book I use at school but he didn't want it. I didn't understand why and he just kept saying he didn't want to."

He eventually took the literature book. She thinks it may

have been to please her. He sat with it silently, staring at its pages. He knew he needed help.

He describes their relationship as a 'special friendship' because it did not take much time for him to debate whether he should trust her with his secret.

"At first I was like, 'Should I, or shouldn't I...' Then I think, 'Look I have a problem and I need to deal with this, whether she stays with me or doesn't, I have to face this.'" Being honest with himself and his girlfriend paid off. He told her the second week after he started a NALIS Youth Literacy class last October at the Chaguanas Public Library. She's supported him ever since.

Carla Mohammed, Adrian's former tutor at the Youth Literacy class, said that his spelling has improved significantly since he first started the programme. "Out of four in a class of six students with a spelling problem, Adrian was the weakest," she explained. "He has come a long, long way. Adrian did all he could within his power to improve. He was very committed."

Now he's thinking about bigger things. TT Defence Force or Coast Guard. He wants to be a mechanical engineer AND a man in uniform, he says.

As we wrap up the interview, I notice a sign on the wall behind him. I draw his attention to it. "Readers are leaders," he reads aloud to me.

PHOTO: DESIREE MCEACHRANE

ALTA in Mayaro

▶ Sea Breeze Fans a New Approach

by Paula Lucie-Smith

Page 6, NEWSDAY SECTION B Monday, September 5, 2011

EDUCATION

bpTT gives Mayaro students a jump start in literacy skills

IN preparation for the re-opening of school, over 70 primary and secondary school students from Mayaro and environs successfully graduated from literacy skills vacation workshops conducted at the bpTT Mayaro Resource Centre.

This is the fifth year in succession that the series of literacy workshops has been organised by the Adult Literacy Tutors Association (ALTA) in collaboration with sponsors BP Trinidad and Tobago.

Ronda Francis, corporate social responsibility manager, bpTT, explained the purpose of the workshops. "Many of these youths just needed a little extra attention in order to become more comfortable with reading and other skills. These workshops have helped them to make real progress before the new school term starts. Having graduated, they have are at a higher level of attitude and aptitude in reading and writing. BP TT believes that the more we enquire the minds of young people, the better Mayaro, and the entire nation will be," Francis pointed out.

Although catering for ages ten to 16, a few adults still attended the daily workshops, which spanned from July 11 to August 26. The sessions were geared toward helping participants develop and strengthen their literacy-based skills, including reading and spelling.

Grounded according to aptitude,

RENE-MARIE WILSON (left), Manager, bpTT Mayaro Resource Centre, shows these students a poster inviting persons to register for free ALTA literacy classes in September.

ALTA tutors guide these students through their lessons during literacy camps held at the bpTT Mayaro Resource Centre.

the participants were given personalised attention by trained and accredited ALTA tutors.

ALTA workshop coordinator, Hammond Jagai, was enthused by the students' achievements. "We have been administering these vacation workshops with bpTT for the past several years, and every year, the children graduate feeling more confident in their abilities. Every one of them represents the potential of our nation and it our responsibility to foster and develop that enormous potential," Jagai said.

*bpTT continues on Page 15B

ALTA
The Adult Literacy Tutors Association
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FREE

Reading and Writing

The July/August programme in Mayaro began in 2005, emerging from the partnership between British Petroleum Trinidad and Tobago (BPTT) and ALTA. BPTT had noticed that literacy levels within Mayaro and Guayaguayare were hindering residents from accessing employment opportunities. On an oil rig, signs with critical safety information are at every turn and reading these can be a matter of life and death.

Spurred by BPTT's interest in expanding ALTA in Mayaro, residents formed the Mayaro Literacy Improvement Committee (MLIC). Retired primary school teacher Agatha Williams, who had been teaching a small ALTA class in Mayaro for seven years, was a key member of MLIC. ALTA trainer and coordinator Lystra Hazarie, who had spent 18 years working in Guayaguayare, took on the responsibility for managing and guiding the new ALTA initiative in Mayaro.

Village by village, MLIC hosted meetings with a two-fold aim: break down the barriers which make the non-literate reluctant to join an adult literacy class; and encourage literate community members to train as volunteer ALTA tutors. BPTT commissioned a 15-minute ALTA DVD featuring ALTA students to bring the ALTA experience live and direct to the communities. (YouTube link - <http://www.youtube.com/user/ALTATrinidad>) The literacy awareness campaign has since become an annual event.

In June 2005, working with the MLIC, ALTA conducted a training course at the Mayaro Resource Centre (MRC), BPTT's

former sports club converted in 2002 into a public multi-purpose facility. Following the established ALTA model, 18 new volunteer tutors started ALTA classes for adults in September.

But Mayaro was to bring something new to ALTA. Seven recipients of BPTT's Brighter Prospects scholarships had also trained as tutors. As they were heading to UWI in September, they had to complete their 150 hours of volunteer service in the two months after training. Thus was the intensive July-August programme at the MRC born.

Over seven weeks classes run daily from Monday to Friday in two shifts, 8am-1pm and then 1pm-5pm, offering all four levels – Beginner, Levels 1, 2 and 3 – and from 2010, introducing the new ALTA Spelling Programme. Initially the daily programme attracted adults, notably agricultural workers from Kernahan since this was a slow time for the watermelon crop. However in 2008 when the Ministry of Education terminated the BPTT-sponsored ALTA instruction at Mayaro Composite and Guayaguayare High, parents flocked to enroll their children in the July-August programme. 106 students enrolled in July-August 2009 and the vast majority were aged 10 to 16. Average annual enrolment since then is around 60 students.

Ronda Francis, Corporate Social Responsibility Manager, BPTT, explained the purpose of the July-August literacy programme. "These workshops form the ideal mechanism to help youths make real progress before the new school term starts. When they leave here they are at a higher level of attitude and aptitude in

reading and writing. BPTT believes that the more we energise the minds of young people, the better Mayaro and the entire nation would be."

The 2012 teaching team was high in praise of BPTT's unwavering support saying, "Our sponsor puts into practice ul Haq's human development paradigm that it is the duty of the present generation to make a better place for future generations. We are pleased that we are part of this programme which enables us to fulfill our obligation to leave the world a better place than we have found it."

The programme has the added benefit of job creation. Through its sponsorship, BPTT has provided annual employment for 15 tutors who have proved themselves well able to deliver the ALTA programme as volunteer tutors. The teachers have had to adapt to the different demands of teaching teens. The exuberance of youth energises but also presents challenges, so classroom rules are emphasised to safeguard the well-being of each student.

ALTA's repertoire of literacy games helps keep students engaged and all look forward to the field trip. This provides fun and class-bonding, plus real-life stimulation for creative writing. At the following session, each student writes about the outing. Together with their tutors, students create a book, illustrated with their photos. Graduation is similarly anticipated, with students who master their level proudly receiving their ALTA certificates before smiling parents.

Accustomed to breaking barriers, the ALTA-BPTT July-August 2012 teaching team has taken on the challenge of returning a higher percentage of students to their mainstream classes in September 2012 with an ALTA certificate showing mastery of their literacy level.

Over eight years, the team of ALTA, BPTT and Mayaro has shaped a successful, intensive literacy programme which is now ready for export to the rest of the country. It's waiting for enlightened sponsors or government interest. Just think how much money and time would be saved if applicants for any of the overlapping skills-training programmes were first screened for literacy, and those with inadequate reading and writing attended an ALTA Mayaro model of intensive literacy instruction before starting their vocational course! Imagine intensive ALTA literacy programmes in community centres across the nation! After 50 years of independence, isn't it time to ensure that every citizen has the tools to be independent?



Agatha Williams tutors students in the Mayaro July/August Programme

Meet five students who came back to spend more than one vacation in the July-August Programme

2007 - Ashley Thomas

"One thing I do know is that sessions are never boring. They may be very challenging at times, but never boring. Even when one is repeating a level, as I did, going over the same phonics and skills taught, one is not bored. One gets a better and clearer understanding of the skills, for example, the 'schwa' – that tricky thing that makes spelling so difficult, the inconsistencies of the English language and lots more."

2008 - Johnwayne Motie

"I know that I still have a lot to learn but I am grateful for this start, because I was admitted to the programme even though I am under the entry age of 16 years. I am from Kernahan and BPTT has provided transport for me every class day since I joined the programme as a Level 2 student in July 2007. Thank you very much, BPTT, ALTA and all my tutors."

2012

Jesse Thirteen-year-old Jesse is a Standard 4 student of Sangre Grande who heard about the ALTA-BPTT July-August literacy programme in 2011 and made the journey to Mayaro every day for over six weeks. The improvement in his academic performance, sparked by his advances in reading and spelling, prompted his return to the programme. Jesse divulged that he has developed a love for reading, has joined the library and enjoys reading both school material and comic books. Jesse's tutor observes, "His elevated self-esteem, new-found ability to express himself and improved social skills are remarkable."

Sharmila too returned to the programme because she learnt a lot from the classes. "I can now read a lot better, spell and write stories," she says. "I made many friends and they helped me with my work. I liked the tutors because they made learning fun and easy."

O'Neil is proud to announce that he started ALTA in Level 1 and is now in Level 2. "I know how to spell and read. I learn how to break up words and I can read them. I know how to do syllable division and when to drop 'e'. I like coming to the class to do better in my work. I like best to write and do syllable division and play games in class."



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ALTA in the Caribbean

▶ Half a Decade in Grenada

by Paula Lucie-Smith

form the Grenada Adult Literacy Tutors Association (GALTA) to support one another in this new field.

1999 marked the start of a five-year collaboration spearheaded by Ann Antoine's tremendous drive and energy. The annual Easter ALTA training expanded from NGOs and the 3Rs teachers to school teachers following introduction of universal secondary education. By the 2003 training course, seven Grenada master tutors worked alongside ALTA facilitators and later conducted their own refresher training for continuing tutors. In July 2004, the Grenada team co-facilitated training in Trinidad. All was in place for the new academic year and the gradual transition to Grenadian delivery of ALTA training.

On the day carded for registration of adult literacy students, Tuesday 7th September, the day before International Literacy Day September 8th,

ALTA training team in Grenada on their day off

In April 1999, the ALTA training team (Marie-Louise Brown-Dottin, Shereen Khan, Paula Campbell and myself) boarded a flight to Grenada after thankfully surrendering our overweight bags stuffed with 26 ALTA training handbooks, 26 ALTA Book 1 tutor books, Level 1 and Level 2 workbooks and a range of training materials. At the invitation of Executive Director Ann Antoine, we were bound for the New Life Organisation (NEWLO) which offers skills training along the lines of SERVOL, and as with all such programmes for young people who have not succeeded in school, poor reading and writing was continuing to hinder progress.

NEWLO'S residential centre in Palmiste on the Northwest coast became the location of ALTA's first tutor training course outside of T&T. Housed on-site in the dorms, the ALTA trainers were immersed in the Grenada experience and the 26 participants from NEWLO and other NGOs were likewise immersed in six days of ALTA with just a weekend break. Neither group was deterred by the sweltering heat.

Participants and organisers were so impressed, that in less than six months, the Grenada Ministry of Gender and Family Affairs contracted ALTA to train 24 persons who would be employed by their 3Rs Programme to teach the ALTA literacy programme to adults in their communities. ALTA training moved to the capital at the fully-equipped and spacious training room of the Agency for Rural Transformation (ART). ALTA materials were shipped to, housed at and distributed by NEWLO. Instructor Denise Hypolite Brathwaite headed the implementation of ALTA at NEWLO and came together with the ALTA-trained tutors to

Hurricane Ivan raged through the island destroying everything – including the burgeoning literacy programme. The ART training room disappeared. ALTA books rode the waves out to sea. Key personnel dispersed – one married an aid worker and moved to London; another soon left to further her literacy studies; Ann Antoine was the new Minister of Health, managing a massive crisis. When people could think about literacy, the government had changed and, as is often the case, distanced themselves from previous programmes. ALTA was out; Cuban Yo Si Puedo was in.

Useful lessons came out of these five years of work. First, the differences within the Caribbean are minor compared to our common ground. This was clear in the Creole language session on the training course and the ease with which training teams moved between the two islands. Second, be cautious when partnering with government – programme sustainability requires non-government support. Third, it is far more difficult to re-build networks of people than physical structures.

On a personal level, I gained a view of Trinidad as a shopping Mecca for the rest of the Caribbean. I had several requests to buy fabric in POS to bring on my return. I also have an everlasting supply of nutmeg presented at the end of each course – more valuable now since the destruction of the nutmeg groves and providing an enduring and welcome reminder of ALTA's time in the Spice Island.

ALTA in the Spotlight

► Paula Accepts Anthony N Sabga Caribbean Award for Excellence

5 May 2012



From left: Hetty Sarjeant, Marise Warner, Paula Lucie-Smith, Hamilton Padmore, Maureen Baldeo & Jeanette Williams

It is wonderful to receive this award especially in this 20th anniversary year of ALTA. No NGO survives 20 years on the strength of one person alone, so I share this award with my family and ALTA's volunteer tutors, past and present, some of whom are here in the audience.

In the audience too, is ALTA's founding student Yvonne, who spoke on the video. This is fitting, since Yvonne was the first ALTA student in the mid-90s to come out, face the cameras and say "I am learning to read," – a ground-breaking statement because when an adult says, "I can't read", often the listener thinks "You are stupid", and the non-reader knows this.

So those who don't read learn early to hide this – which is possible because you can't see literacy. How a person looks does not tell you if they can read and write. Indeed this audience could be ALTA students – the attire doesn't say you are literate as all Trinis know how to dress for a formal occasion.

Not surprising then that adults with literacy difficulties are ignored. What is surprising is this award going to someone in the field of adult literacy – a really welcome surprise marking a break with traditional thinking.

We in the Caribbean think we are a literate people. The ALTA national literacy survey in 1994 showed one in four adults to have difficulty with basic everyday reading. The 1995 UWI survey revealed that only 45% of the adult population could read a simple newspaper paragraph. Yet 18 years later, T&T still boasts of literacy rates in the high 90s.

By spotlighting adult literacy, this award can start to change the way we think about literacy. Over the last 20 years, it has become obvious to me that reading is a skill and as with all skills, some of us have natural talent and acquire it easily; some have great difficulty and need specialised instruction; most fall at the various points between these two poles of ease and difficulty. So some brains come wired for reading and writing, others do not.

Equally important, this wiring does not say anything about your ability to think. This is brought home to me every year on the first day of training for new volunteer tutors when we ask them to read eight lines of mirror text. All are readers with a good grade in English, yet some struggle with the task to the point of giving up, while others read as if it were standard text.

For many, the experience of fighting with print is an eye opener to the complexity of reading and erases for all time the thought that because a person can't read, they are stupid.

At ALTA, we teach 2,000 students a year; the surveys showed more than 200,000 to be at ALTA Levels. One factor restricting the number we can reach is funding, and the funds from this award will make a marked impact, particularly as this funding can be assigned where we see the greatest need.

I have a vision of taking ALTA online or onto interactive DVD. This would bypass the shame factor as well as national boundaries to take ALTA Caribbean-wide. This grant will begin to make ALTA online /DVD a reality.

But this award is much more than funding. An award for excellence makes adult literacy, and ALTA specifically, visible as never before.

So maybe Caribbean governments will begin to understand that literacy screening, followed by an effective programme of instruction, is a compulsory part of every skills training programme. Here in T&T, ALTA is ready to partner with the Ministries of Science, Technology and Tertiary Education, Community Development, Education and National Security (prisons, YTC and MYPART) to deliver two People's Partnership campaign promises – to work with NGOs and to make literacy a priority.

Maybe companies will recognise that spending to enhance employees' literacy is money well spent and see ALTA as a partner to develop a literate workforce.



*Paula Lucie-Smith with stalwart
ALTA student Yvonne Greenidge*

Maybe ALTA will get more volunteers and even new partners to take the ALTA Programme to those our free classes cannot serve, like teens and the disabled.

Maybe adult literacy courses will become as commonplace as computer and cake-icing courses. When going to an adult literacy class is no more emotionally challenging than the latter classes, then we will be on the road to literacy.

Maybe ... this is being optimistic, but optimism is a necessary trait in NGO work. Years ago a volunteer consultant from Canadian Executive Services Overseas said to me that she had never met such a well-organised dreamer.

So maybe these ideas are just me dreaming, but even if none of these ideas come to pass, this award will make those struggling with reading on a daily basis feel that they are not alone, that – in the words of an ALTA student, they have a place in the heart of society.

Yvonne often says that ALTA is a big family and like all families, one member's success reflects on the whole family. This was brought home to me this week when I was at the Beginner class just at the other end of Pembroke Street from here. Word had spread in the class of the award and they presented me with a gift and card signed by all, saying they were proud of me.

And it struck me that it was more than just that they were proud of me – they were proud to be part of ALTA. What a turnaround! Where before they felt shame in going to an ALTA class, now students are proud to be in ALTA, branded excellent. (View on YouTube - <http://www.youtube.com/user/ANSCAFE> Caribbean Awards 2012 Ceremony at NAPA, Port of Spain).

How Can You Help ALTA?

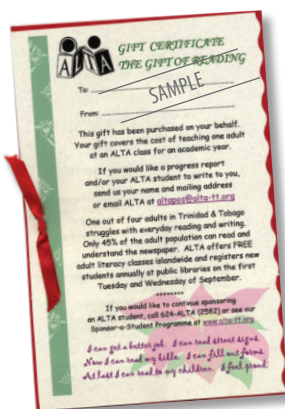
Sponsor-a-Student

(down-load form from www.alta-tt.org)

\$500 per year. Although our students attend classes for free, there are many costs involved in providing ALTA instruction. ALTA will match a student to you and send you an annual report on his/her progress.

Gift of Reading

\$500 per year. Your loved one will receive a certificate signifying that a contribution has been made to ALTA on their behalf. Also makes a great corporate gift!



Buy a Book or Board Game

ALTA Spelling Dictionary: For anyone who has to stop to think before writing certain words. Use either as a reference book to target your specific problem areas or work your way step-by-step through the rules and strategies to acquire a comprehensive knowledge of the mechanics of English spelling.

ALTA Caribbean Six-in-One Game Pack: Six board games with a Caribbean flavour to develop maths and all aspects of literacy: speaking, listening, reading, writing and thinking. For ages seven and up.

Join the Friends of ALTA

(down-load form from www.alta-tt.org)

\$100 per year. Volunteer your services in an area of your choice, from fundraising and sourcing donations, to help in the office at peak times or creating graphics for ALTA publications or ads.

Become a Reading Circle Guide

Assist ALTA students with their reading, in an informal setting, once a week for two hours. This is less of a commitment than being a volunteer tutor and requires just one day of training. No training needed if you just want to help students practise computer skills or use the IBM Reading

Companion software at one of the ALTA offices, Arima, Belmont or San Fernando. *"The Reading Circle gives participants the opportunity to further practise their skills in a relaxed, nurturing atmosphere."* S. Harewood, ALTA Reading Guide

Become an ALTA Tutor

Complete our six-day intensive training course (April-May) and teach at an ALTA class for one academic year, twice a week for two hours each time. This is voluntary; tutors receive no remuneration. Prior to the training, attend an interview and observe eight classes taught by an experienced tutor.



Her Excellency Karen L. McDonald, High Commissioner for Canada, with ALTA Level 3 students displaying their workbooks sponsored by the Canada Fund. Sitting: ALTA CEO Paula Lucie-Smith and tutor Paula Williams



Above: ALTA students play Forest Walk from the Caribbean Six-in-One Game Pack

Right: ALTA Chairman Hetty Sarjeant receives a donation from UK Women's Club



"Nothing compares to the fulfillment gained from sharing your skills with others." M. Thomas, ALTA Tutor

Sponsor-a-Class

\$5,000 per tutor. Class sponsorship is calculated by tutor and includes tutor training, subsidizing of ALTA books for students, providing classroom supplies and the monitoring of tutors by experienced coordinators. *"It is one of the organizations that has the support of all the directors of the Neal and Massy Foundation. ALTA stands out for doing a remarkable job."* Gaston Aguilera, Chairman, Neal and Massy Foundation

Sponsor Materials Development

Your organization can sponsor the publication

of ALTA workbooks and related teaching aids. This contribution can vary from \$5,000 to \$25,000. ALTA plans to take the programme online, and for this, you have another option – lending IT or computer animation expertise. *"[ALTA's] thorough and continuously evolving materials provide the necessary tools required by those who seek their help in improving literacy skills... We are proud to work with the Association in their nation-building efforts; efforts which are aligned with our overall aim of building successful societies."* Nadia Williams, Social Investment Officer, Group Marketing and Communications, Republic Bank Limited.

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