



MassAAL Newsletter

Massachusetts Alliance for Adult Literacy

Funded by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education & Supported by SABES (System for Adult Basic Education Support)

SPRING 2009

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MassAAL Entering its 10th Year

By Ernest Best

As MassAAL enters its 10th year, we look back and realize it's been both a difficult and at the same time an enjoyable struggle for us as current and former adult learners of ABE (Adult Basic Education) and ESOL (English Speakers of Other Languages) programs to bring the concept of student leadership to the field in the state of Massachusetts. Our goal was, then as it still is today, is to utilize student leadership as a way of bringing out the best in the adult learner by helping him or her to develop lifelong skills that will last them far beyond the classroom and that will allow them to be advocates for their families, their neighborhoods, their communities and beyond. We feel that student leadership helps programs as well, by helping to boost morale and assist in creating a sense of community in the programs where the principles of student leadership are practiced and student leadership activities are being carried out. Places where students feel a sense of community and most of all **respect** as adults who come to the classroom with life experiences that have value and worth, are places where it would be a given that persistence rates are higher than those programs that do not share those qualities.

MassAAL began with that idea, and at the same time with the idea that we as students and graduates of ABE programs can achieve whatever we put in our minds to achieve. We see ourselves no less than anyone else. We want to share that same positive attitude with other adult learners and help develop

that same sense of confidence by having them become involved in specially designed student leadership activities to help bring that out. MassAAL also began as a place for adult learners to have a sense of community (statewide) beyond the classroom to share our experiences and to meet others like ourselves who have a dream that they are trying to achieve.

With the help of David Rosen formerly the director of the ALRI (Adult Literacy Resource Institute) in Boston and former Northeast Regional SABES Director, Marcia Hohn, MassAAL collaborated with

We honor the work of countless ABE programs and practitioners who support student leadership.

SABES to distribute Student Leadership Health Grants; from the student leadership health grant projects emerged a real adult learner leader—Carmen Lebron.

Carmen led her student leadership team with a project that saved lives. Her team obtained a van fully supplied with medical equipment and got healthcare professionals to volunteer as staff.

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MassAAL 2008 Student Leadership Conference, Photos by Carey Reid

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They themselves were trained as intake workers. They also produced a remote cable broadcast and went on the radio promoting free health screening on their van. The community response was overwhelming. They literally had saved lives. People found out that they had diabetes, HIV and other ailments and were able to be treated in time to live quality lives. Since their project was so successful the town now covers the cost of the van and it still exists to this day. Carmen Lebron is now the president of the MassAAL Board of Directors.

In the fall of the year 2001, MassAAL worked with MCAE and other organizations, practitioners and students from across the state that helped get funding restored to the ABE line item when it had already been cut. Our efforts literally saved the field of adult ed in Massachusetts as we know it.

In the year 2005 MassAAL assisted VALUE (MassAAL's national counterpart) in getting Senator Kennedy to work against former President Bush's proposed cut to adult education at the federal level, which would have cut adult education altogether in some states. Other organizations at the national level and MCAE at the state level from Massachusetts also played a role. Senator Kennedy worked closely with our organizations VALUE and MassAAL and had senators and congressman to meet us in rooms in the Senate Building and in the building of the House of Representatives to hear our stories of why adult ed is so important to us. By the time we left Washington, D.C., former President Bush's proposed cut to adult ed was defeated. Adult learners played a major role in this successful effort. Thank you to Donna Swain, MassAAL's first

president for getting Senator Kennedy to work with us.

MassAAL has come a long way as an organization that just wanted a sense of community among adult learners and helping to give students an effective voice in their programs, to an organization that is effective statewide and nationally as well. These impressive accomplishments were made possible in part with the help of some outstanding MassAAL members and students who are not yet members that played a major role—we can't thank you enough.

Special thanks goes out to the many people and organizations that helped MassAAL get started and that also helped us as we've gone through our many stages of growth. I'm afraid to name particular people here, because there are, in fact so many, and I know I'll offend them if I leave out anyone's name, but I do have to thank all of the SABES

One dream, one person, one diploma at a time.

Regional Centers for their strong support over the years. It could not have been done without you. SABES Central Resource Center and World Education where we are now housed and will be leaving in June. Thank you so much for your support and MassAAL is looking forward to working towards future successes and our ultimate goal of ABE services on demand whenever and wherever needed.

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First Literacy (formally the Boston Adult Literacy Fund), the ALRI (Adult Literacy Resource Institute), Operation Bootstrap in Lynn, and the LVM (Literacy Volunteers of Massachusetts) were among our first supporters even before we became an officially funded organization. We were students with an idea that they also believed in.

Our mission could not be carried out without our funders; with the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education being the first. Bob Bickerton was director of ACLS at the time. He strongly believed in the idea of a statewide student run organization. His blessing inspired us to move forward and do all the things necessary to become an officially funded organization. The Hyams Foundation and The Boston Foundation also believed in our work, which further allowed MassAAL to grow as an organization with our Adult Literacy Awareness Day event that has become an institution in the field.

The Massachusetts Coalition for Adult Education (MCAE) who was also been there since the beginning has always been a supporter of MassAAL, sharing their time and expertise with us over the years. Our two organizations now collaborate on conducting trainings for adult learners that give them skills that will last them throughout their lives. We look forward to continuing our relationship with them and all the organizations mentioned here in some capacity.

Thank you again to all of you who have supported MassAAL over the years. We greatly appreciate your time and effort.

Extra special thanks go out to the MassAAL Board of Directors, they give of their time and even weekends for the organization. There are no words to show my appreciation for their dedication to the organization and their strong support for its director.



Student 2008 Leadership Conference: from left to right, Ernest Best, Meg Murphy, Carey Reid, Suzanne Speciale, Janet Nicholas, Anne Serino

MassAAL on the Move

By Luanne Teller, SABES CRC Director

On July 1st, MassAAL will relocate to its new office as part of its ongoing transition to independent non-profit status. As of this writing, MassAAL has already been incorporated and is awaiting notification of its 501 (c) 3 status, according to MassAAL Director, Ernest Best. This logical next step is like most “growing pains”---exciting and a little scary at the same time.

There have been many people involved in this transition. I would like to acknowledge the many SABES staff and Regional Support Centers who have supported MassAAL; the CRC staff who have worked tirelessly over the past year to support MassAAL and this transitional phase; World Education which has housed MassAAL for the past three years; the MassAAL Board members who have devoted the past year to the necessary steps to complete this transition; the staff at MCAE who are long-time staunch supporters of student leadership activities and MassAAL; and Ernest Best, the MassAAL Director who has been at the helm of the organization since its inception.

I would also like to acknowledge MassAAL's funders: The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education/Adult and Community Learning Services; The Boston Foundation; and the Hyams Foundation; and also to recognize MassAAL's other fiscal agent, First Literacy. It is because of their financial investment and commitment to student leadership that MassAAL is able to promote its mission and host successful events like the annual Adult Literacy Awareness Day and upcoming Student Leadership Conference.

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Aida is currently a student at the Notre Dame Education Center in Boston. Aida Ramos has told this story to me on a radio broadcast and has given me permission to write it here for this newsletter.

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We honor the work of countless ABE programs and practitioners who support student leadership---not just in words, but in their daily work with adult learners. Last, but most importantly, I want to acknowledge the adult learners who are at the core of our work and the foundation of MassAAL. They inspire us.

As MassAAL takes this next step, please rest assured that SABES will remain firm in our support of and commitment to student leadership activities in ABE programs across Massachusetts.

The Aida Ramos Story:

*Story of survival, perseverance,
drive and determination*

By Aida Ramos and Ernest Best

This year of 2009, so far, has been particularly gratifying. During the MassAAL/MCAE Advocacy/Media Trainings, and the MassAAL Adult Literacy Awareness Day event at the State House I've met some extraordinary students. Many of them were natural born advocates and some were naturals when it came to dealing with the media. One lady in particular, for me, stood out above the rest. Her story exemplified the triumph of the human spirit. She was born in Puerto Rico. She told me of a story of how she was born a "crack baby" and as a result her mother was not allowed custody of her. She subsequently was stolen out of the hospital in the dead of night by her mother. Somehow, they made it to New York undetected. There, her mother continued on drugs and her children were about to be taken from her yet again. So

again, she stole them away, this time to Boston. For nineteen years her mother remained on drugs and her daughter's (and siblings) life was a living hell. The daughter left home as a teenager; wound up homeless and in a shelter with a baby by then. Several years went by with unspeakable hardships and horrors. With virtually raising herself without the guidance of responsible adults in her life, she finds herself with five children and no education to speak of.

She makes the decision to enroll in an adult literacy program for the GED. There she found a program that had what she needed—a sense of community, a positive environment and

a healthy place to belong. She says she has a new-found strength and a clear sense of what she needs and what she wants in her life for her and her

**If she can do it,
then anyone can.**

children. She spoke to me of her unwavering sense of determination to succeed, not only at getting the GED, but to go on to college as well. Even there she has specific goals and knows exactly what she wants to study. She then faced another tragedy in her life only last year, in April of 2008 when her two nieces were tragically killed in a house fire set by an arsonist. Her new-found strength and her place of belonging at her adult ed program (and belief in God) are a large part of the reason why she has not given up on her dreams and was able to deal with this tragedy without it breaking her.

She has organized her community for the anniversary of her nieces' passing and she has given a speech urging the community to use this moment to do something constructive rather than having something negative come out of their feelings of hurt and loss.

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She told them how Adult Basic Education has had a positive affect on her life and that they should take advantage of ABE services just as she has, in order to raise the quality of life in the community, in honor of the children that they all loved and watched grow.

The reason I continue to do this work is because I get to meet people like her. I am sure that her story of survival, perseverance, drive and determination will be helpful to countless others, in and outside of adult ed programs. I will do my best to create venues for her to inspire others to do the same. If she can do it, with all that she had against her, then anyone can. **She embodies the qualities of student leadership —qualities that all of us as graduates or current students of adult ed programs should try to aspire.** Her story is truly an example of triumph of the human spirit.



Adult Literacy Awareness Day 2009 at the State House, Photos by Carey Reid

MassAAL Adult Literacy Awareness Day 2009

Students Can and Do Make a Difference

The MassAAL Adult Literacy Awareness Day (ALAD) held on Thursday, March 12th at the Massachusetts State House was a huge success. Well over a thousand adult learners from almost every part of the state were in attendance. State House security informed us that the **ALAD event is the largest one by far** that is held there.

Thank you to MassAAL members and to all of you who helped to get the word out about the event. This year it took a little more effort on the part of everyone to repeat the large turnout that we had in previous years. The adult learners who had to travel long distances to make the annual trek found, for the most part, that funding for the buses to travel to the State House just wasn't available.

Practitioners and students in those regions still found a way to make it happen. That's why I feel their efforts, this year, to get to the State House are truly extraordinary and greatly appreciated by MassAAL, and by all who helped to make it happen. To make that kind of effort to get to the State House, and in these kinds of numbers, shows me that **this event has become an institution in the field of adult literacy.** We just can't thank them enough.

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Mark Your Calendar:

May 15, 2009

MassAAL Student Leadership Conference at QCC Worcester

For updates, please check the SABES Website Student Leadership section at www.sabes.org.

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These events are more than just an opportunity for students to get together for a good time. For example, last year, at the state level, ABE was facing a cut of nearly a million dollars. About the same number of students that attended the ALAD event this year attended last year. Combined with the calls students made before and after the event and additional visits to the State House, along with MCAE who played a major role, those efforts earned an increase of \$1.1 million dollars-about a hundred thousand dollars more than what the proposed cut was supposed to be, making FY 09's cuts less difficult to bear. **Students can and do make a difference!**



*Students
can and do make a
difference!*



Adult Literacy Awareness Day 2009 at the State House, Photos by Carey Reid



For more information please contact:

Ernest Best, Executive Director
Massachusetts Alliance for Adult Literacy
117 Mt. Pleasant Avenue
Boston, MA 02119

Phone: 617-482-9485

Fax: 617-482-0617

E-mail: MassAAL@hotmail.com

MassAAL is the voice for the adult learner in Adult Basic Education (ABE), English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), and GED programs in Massachusetts.

MassAAL assists the adult learner in developing lifelong leadership skills, creates public awareness about the need for adult literacy, and strengthens the adult learner's voice in shaping public policy for adult literacy services in Massachusetts.

MassAAL empowers adult learners by helping them to have a collective voice in how their ABE programs are run.

How to Join MassAAL

Fill out the form below and mail it to the address provided.

. Pay \$1.00 dues if you are an adult learner or former adult learner.

. Pay \$5.00 dues if you are a teacher or other ABE supporter.

Name _____

Date: _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____

Zip _____

Phone () _____

Email Address _____

MassAAL
117 Mt. Pleasant Avenue
Boston, MA 02119