

Literacy unlocks a whole new world

At 47, school crossing guard ends a lifetime of missed opportunities

By Lesley Grimm

Most people don't go back to school at age 47—but Debra Leach isn't like most people.

Fearless, optimistic and determined, Leach enrolled in a reading course with Literacy Partners three years ago.

That decision transformed her life. She has since learned how to read and she scored a job she loves as a school crossing guard. She has also recently earned a national award for her dedication.

"It's just a blessing," Leach said in a recent interview. "They told me during class. My mouth dropped and then I got teary eyed."

Debra Leach, 50, has been named the "Outstanding Adult Basic Education and General Education Development Learner" by the Commission on Adult Basic Education (COABE).

COABE is an association of adult educators from around the country that focuses on professional development and advocacy. Each will receive her award

at a banquet in St. Louis, Missouri on April 30.

"People need to know that sometimes we make mistakes, but when you're given a second chance—you go for it," Leach said.

For almost 30 years, Leach worked as a machine operator for a plastics company, but her factory job barely paid the bills.

She missed out on promotions because of her inability to read.

"They wanted to make me a supervisor, but I couldn't do the paperwork," said Leach, who admits she could only read "a little bit."

Her fate was set when Leach dropped out of school at an early age.

"I was rebellious. I wanted to do what I wanted to do," she said.

But after years in the factory, Leach knew that what she wanted was more out of life and a better future.

"I knew my time was running out. I had no experience doing anything else," she said. "You lose out on a lot when you can't read. A lot of



After learning how to read at the age of 47, Debra Leach earned a position as a school crossing guard with the New York City Police Department.

doors were slammed in my face."

But then she saw a sign for Literacy Partners on the side of a bus and made one life-changing phone call.

Going back to school was tough, especially at first.

"It was like I had cobwebs in my head after not being in

school for 30-something years," Leach said.

But with time and determination, she vastly improved her reading skills.

With that came the confidence and ability to apply for a new job. A Bedford-Stuyvesant resident, Leach

now works as a school cross-

ing guard for the New York Police Department in Crown Heights.

She said it was one of her proudest moments to be able to model her new crossing guard uniform for her husband shortly before his death from cancer in November of 2005.

Susan McLean, executive director of Literacy Partners, congratulated Debra Leach for her accomplishments.

"When she came to us, she was looking for a way to put the pieces back together," McLean said.

McLean also thanked Leach for her willingness to publicly share her journey.

"Debra's story may give other adult learners the courage they need to come forward," McLean said.

McLean said reading problems like Leach's are "all too common." One million New York City adults, or one out of three, read below the fifth grade level.

However, McLean said many adults do not come forward and seek help and education because of feelings of shame and humiliation.

Low-reading and illiterate adults have difficulty doing basic daily tasks like navigating a subway map, understanding the directions on a medicine bottle or even reading their child a bedtime story.

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Brooklyn resident Debra Leach has earned a top honor from a national adult education organization.

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Over the past 35 years, Literacy Partners has made inroads into this problem by helping over 25,000 New Yorkers with free adult and family literacy programs.

The not-for-profit organization sees about 2000 students each year and currently teaches out of 12 different locations throughout the city.

In partnership with the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation, Literacy Partners recently began offering free reading and writing classes for low-income residents in Brooklyn at Restoration Plaza in Bedford-Stuyvesant.

McLean said it is "wonderfully gratifying" to see students make tangible differ-

ences in their lives. One former student, she said, is now enrolled in a master's program at university.

Leach may not be far behind. She still attends two free classes with Literacy Partners each week and is working toward her GED.

"My future plan is to attend college," Leach said.

In her job as a crossing guard, she's grown close to many children and now wants to reach out to the city's youth.

"I want to study social work. There are a lot of children that need help, that have lost their way," Leach said.

For information on Literacy Partners, call (212) 725-9200 or visit www.literacypartners.com.