Lincoln Literacy Celebrates 50 Years of Service

A sold-out crowd gathered to celebrate Lincoln Literacy’s 50th anniversary on Oct. 27. About 260 supporters, tutors, and students filled The Gala in south Lincoln to reflect on a half-century of achievement and to honor retiring Executive Director Clayton Naff. The event raised more than $50,000 to help our neighbors improve their English, bolster their literacy, and connect to careers through our English Language Learner and Adult Skills programs.

The gathering sampled international cuisine and watched energizing performances from Japanese drumming group Kyoko Taiko and a dance troupe from the Gurukulam Center for Indian Arts. Former students Artemio Zevala and Nigora Aminova spoke about how Lincoln Literacy classes helped them vault the language barrier and set them on a path to success in divergent ways.

Clayton Naff speaks at the 50th Anniversary Gala

Artemio, an immigrant from Mexico, now owns a successful building company, AZ Construction. He spoke about how his Lincoln Literacy classes helped him learn English, make connections in the community, and ultimately enabled him to launch a business. Sandra Rojo, who heads our English language programs, recalls Artemio coming to class on Saturdays, with his children in tow, while his wife Veronica was at work.

These Refugees Are Already Helping Others

Far-away events pulse through our community with unparalleled speed. Last year, the Taliban's violent takeover of Afghanistan forced a quarter-million to flee that country. Hundreds of Afghan refugees now live in Lincoln. That tragedy was swiftly overshadowed by Russia's violent assault on Ukraine. Local sponsors now bring refugees from Ukraine to us almost every day.

Lincoln Literacy recently hired two game-changing coordinators to help us better serve refugees from those upheavals. Natalia Bohuta was an elementary school teacher for five years near Lviv, a large city close to Ukraine’s border with Poland. She earned a master’s degree in primary education with an additional certification to teach English. Natalia, who also privately taught English to students, fled Ukraine earlier this year when Russia invaded her country. She arrived in Lincoln earlier this year with her husband and two children.

“Every town was attacked,” Natalia said. Much of her family remains in Ukraine.
Greetings From Your New Executive Director, Bryan Seck

What an honor it is to serve as the Executive Director of Lincoln Literacy. And what a start it has been! In the last few weeks, we have celebrated our 50th anniversary and Clay’s retirement at the sold-out Gala, passed our largest and most ambitious budget ever, and closed in on 1,000 adults served in 2022. How did I hop on board this speeding train?

My passion for literacy began as a Peace Corps Volunteer dispatched to Kazakhstan from 2004 to 2006. In that Central Asian republic, I served as an English teacher. I learned how to create lesson plans, lead classes and, above all, build trusting relationships with students.

Following my service abroad, I taught English in Washington, D.C., and in New York City, where I earned a master’s in public administration and nonprofit management. After completing my master’s, I got work evaluating federal public health grants.

That job put me on the road to many places including Nebraska, where I met my now-wife, Janell Walther, on a work trip. Having moved here to marry her, I had the opportunity to help start Omaha’s College Possible program, which helps high school students become first-generation college students and follows them through graduation.

I then worked as the Homeless Outreach Specialist for Lincoln Public Schools, serving the 500 students who become homeless each year. In 2018, I joined in the effort to create the MyLink app and website. These provide human services access information in many languages.

Like Lincoln Literacy, I recognize that to decrease poverty, we need to boost people’s skills and career opportunities. For the last six years, I have been focused on improving such opportunities in our community by serving as the Director of Workforce Development for the Lincoln Partnership for Economic Development and Prosper Lincoln, as well as serving as the Chief Talent Management Strategist for Kawasaki Motors Manufacturing Corp., U.S.A.

In these positions, I helped coordinate workforce development activities across agencies, co-created a Lincoln Manufacturing Council course which provides an introduction to manufacturing careers, and worked with the New Americans Task Force to win $300,000 from Google.org for the CareerLadder program to help reconnect professional immigrants and refugees with their careers.

At Lincoln Literacy, I am thrilled to work with an excellent and experienced board and staff alongside passionate volunteer tutors to build the language, literacy, and career skills of the people we serve — in tandem, of course, with partner agencies and businesses. I cannot wait to see what the future brings. Thank you for your support of Lincoln Literacy!

Making Friends with FLAIR

Room 220 at St. Paul United Methodist Church was buzzing on a recent November morning. Ten children — some driving plastic cars, some arranging building blocks, and one eagerly working over a pudding cup — were just about to start a Lincoln Literacy FLAIR class (Family Literacy Activities for Immigrants and Refugees). Four adults oversaw the action before guiding the children into learning about shapes, colors, and other topics.

One late-arriving girl really didn’t want to leave her father’s side, but dad needed to get to his class. The girl began crying. Then, five-year-old Kira, a Ukrainian whose mother also attends an ELL class, offered reassurance. Kira, in her blue dress and blond pigtails, has since become the class’ big sister. “It’s OK,” Kira said, patting the girl on the shoulder.

Some 50 young children are currently taking a FLAIR class, funded by United Way and our donors. By offering free child care and FLAIR classes, Lincoln Literacy allows moms and dads to focus on learning without distraction. The children learn, too, and just might make a new friend — especially if they’re in Kira’s class.

50 Years of Service, cont. from p. 1

Nigora spoke about how Lincoln Literacy made it possible for her to become a CNA working at Bryan Health. (See related story on p. 3.)

Naff closed the event with a light-hearted slideshow highlighting his 16 years as director and saluting the staff and volunteers who made so much progress possible.

“To look out on a sea of faces and to feel their appreciation was one of the most touching experiences of my life,” Naff said. “Altogther, it was a spectacular evening, and a great way to kick off Lincoln Literacy’s next half-century.”

After his farewell speech, Naff passed the torch — literal, though unlit — to his successor, Bryan Seck, who gracefully accepted the looming challenges ahead.

Artemio Zevala speaks at the Anniversary Gala

Kira has a smile for everyone
With a Little Help from Lincoln Literacy, She Became A Lifesaver

Growing up in Tajikistan, Nigora Aminova hoped to follow in the footsteps of her grandfather to become a doctor. But repression and persecution in the former Soviet Republic forced her to flee with her two young children. After seeking refuge in China and Saudi Arabia, she found a home in Lincoln, Nebraska. For years, she worked at Bryan Health, cleaning patient rooms and sterilizing equipment. But still, she dreamed of doing more. When her supervisor told her about Lincoln Literacy’s CNA prep class, she jumped at the chance.

Nigora went through the class in the spring of 2019, where she learned from retired doctors and nurses who volunteer as tutors in the program. She then earned her certification through Bryan College of Health Sciences. Now a CNA, she was rehired at Bryan Health as a patient technician in the neonatal ward, where she helps keep fragile babies alive. When the COVID-19 pandemic put the hospital under great strain, Nigora volunteered to do some of her old sterilization duties along with her new ones.

Working 50 to 60 hours a week, she earned the admiration of all those around her and was featured in Bryan Health’s Journeys magazine.

Today, Nigora performs similarly critical work, monitoring the hearts of cardiac patients. Returning to share her story at the Gala, she thanked everyone at Lincoln Literacy who had helped her and noted that now her daughter is inspired to pursue medical school.

“It was an honor for me to be in such a historical moment,” Nigora wrote afterwards.

Refugees Themselves, They’re Already Helping Others (cont. from p. 1)

“I worry about them, of course, but we keep in touch using Facetime,” she remarks.

Lincoln has proven a safe, welcoming city for Nataliia, who now helps welcome other Ukrainian refugees to Lincoln Literacy and assists them in learning English. She’s also helping our Adult Skills program to further develop our computer literacy, CNA, and other professional skills classes.

Her excellent English skills enabled Nataliia to adjust to living in an American city much faster than many of her fellow Ukrainians. She jumped at the chance to help others. Even before her work authorization came through, she volunteered at Lincoln Literacy.

“I’m very impressed. People are very professional,” Nataliia said. “People want to help others, even if they don’t know them. I love [Lincoln Literacy] with all my heart.”

She’s not alone in that. Afghan Ehsanullah Wazirzai, followed a similarly harrowing path to Lincoln. A civil engineer, Ehsanullah helped U.S. Forces build bases in his home country, putting his life at risk from the Taliban. “Ehsan,” as he’s known at LL, also founded two schools in Kabul in 2014. By last summer, enrollment had swelled to about 700 boys and girls, nearly half of them orphans whose parents served in the Afghan National Army. “Many of their parents lost their lives fighting against the Taliban,” he said.

As the Taliban surged across the country amid the U.S. troop withdrawal, Ehsan scrambled to the airport in Kabul carrying some clothes and $400 he’d hidden in a bag. He flew to the Netherlands, where he was stranded for nine months. Finally, permission to enter the U.S. came through.

Hundreds of other Afghans have resettled in Lincoln over the past year, with many becoming Lincoln Literacy students. Ehsan speaks Dari and Pashto — the two primary languages of Afghanistan — as well as Urdu, Farsi, and English.

He works as a construction manager during the day and then helps Afghans learn English twice a week at our learning site in Community Action’s K St. Head Start center. Though classes have only recently formed, he already has 15 students, many of whom are just beginning to learn English.
Ukrainian Professionals Restart Their Lives in Lincoln

Bohdan Haponenko dismissed the constant talk of war he saw on television. He and his wife, Tanya, went about life in southern Ukraine as normal, assuming the Russian threats were nothing more than saber rattling. Then came a 4 a.m. phone call.

“My friend said ‘the war is starting; the missiles are coming,’” Bohdan recalled.

What followed was the most excruciating month of the young couple’s lives. Prior to the invasion, the Haponenkos had a nice life — he was a lawyer, she was a pharmacist — in the city of Melitopol. But eight days after the fateful phone call, Russian tanks were rolling down the street in front of their apartment.

“It was like a dream,” he said. With supplies of food, gasoline, and medicine dwindling, on April 28 the couple decided to flee. They lived out of their gray Kia Sportage for the next 10 days, traveling through Russian-held Crimea, Georgia, Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, and Slovenia before concluding a 3,000-mile journey in the Czech Republic.

Tanya’s mother met the couple in Prague for a tearful farewell, all three unsure when they would see each other again. Tanya’s mother took the Sportage back to Kyiv and the Haponenkos trudged on, boarding a bus to Berlin to catch a plane bound for New York. They arrived in Lincoln on Sept. 19 and soon began taking classes with Lincoln Literacy.

For months, the Haponenkos rode bikes to their classes and elsewhere, but as the cold weather set in something wonderful happened. They were given a white Chevy Aveo by someone who’d heard about their situation. “We did not know them,” Haponenko said. “It was amazing.”

While the gift of a car is exceptionally generous, it’s in keeping with the character of Lincoln, a city that warmly welcomes refugees — as demonstrated every day by our volunteer tutors.
Remember Lincoln Literacy in your end-of-year giving

How your giving helps us:

$50
One week of classroom materials at our community sites

$100
One set of tutor training workshops

$500
One week of van rides to day and evening classes for refugees

$1,000
Childcare at a community site for one year

$2,500
One semester-long class, including van transport and childcare, at a community site

Donate at www.lincolnliteracy.org/ways-to-give or scan the QR code
Thank you for helping us help our community thrive!

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