FROM HELPLESS TO EMPOWERED

As a young girl in war-torn Sierra Leone, Tenneh witnessed more tragedy than many people could imagine. Having only gone to school until age 11, she couldn’t read street signs or understand directions. She couldn’t find meaningful work. One day her son asked for help with his homework, and she couldn’t. From that moment on, she said, “I am going to learn to read and write so I can help my child.” She connected with a literacy program in her community and is now using a computer on a daily basis. Most importantly for Tenneh, she can now read books to her son.

“What can literacy do for someone’s life? For me, I improved the life of my child.” - Tenneh
IT’S NOT HOW YOU START
IT’S HOW YOU FINISH

“I’m seeing the future and it looks good! I am surrounded by people who care and who are helping me to improve my life.”
— Marty

In the eighth grade, Marty told his teacher that he wasn’t ready for high school because he couldn’t spell or read. His teacher’s reply was that he had to leave to make room for new kids coming in. Marty left high school after the eleventh grade. “I was embarrassed. When you can’t read, you think that you’re the only one like this.” He struggled for years. When an employer told Marty that he needed his high school equivalency diploma to apply for a position, Marty went to Literacy Connects in Tucson, Arizona. “Learning to read changes lives,” Marty said. “Someday, I will get the diploma that I’ve been wanting since I was a kid.”
I COULDN’T SPELL GREEN

“At 8 years old, Henry left school when his family needed his help on the farm. Henry worked hard as he grew up. He farmed, painted houses, drove trucks, and did custodial work. In his 40s, Henry married. His wife read well, and with her help Henry learned to read road signs while driving trucks. She also taught Henry to vote. With the goal of being able to read the Bible, Henry went to his local literacy program. “In the last year, I couldn’t spell green,” Henry said. “If I saw a word like perfect, I’d just pass it up. In the last eight months, I haven’t had to ask for as much help. Reading changes lives.”

“Reading changes lives. It makes you more responsible for your life. Not reading can hurt you.”

— Henry
Raul was born in a small town in Mexico. But economic, political, and social conditions brought him to the United States. He was 18 years old, had $20 in his pocket and a desire to live the American Dream. Things were tough at first since Raul did not speak English. He got a job in a restaurant washing dishes. But, to him, that was not the American Dream. He enrolled in an ESL class to learn the language. After three years he passed the GED® test and enrolled in college. “Stress, fatigue, and a lot of coffee were my daily bread. But guess what? I did it! I graduated. All this is possible because of all the amazing people that helped me along the way.”

“If you are dedicated and work hard, you can find success. You can live your dream.” – Raul
Gerald felt like the invisible boy in the room. Embarrassment and humiliation from peers led him to hide his inability to read. He may appear to be a man, but inside he is still a scared little boy. And now he has a child of his own. “Who’s going to read her bedtime stories? No way is my kid going to have a father who can’t read.” With the help of friends, Gerald was able to break through the basic levels of reading. “I am no longer the phantom in the room. I am now a man who stands proud—who has worked hard. I may one day help others become free of self-imprisonment.”

“Even in the darkest room there will always shine a glimpse of light.” – Gerald
James had been a truck driver, stopping at every truck stop between destinations to ask for verbal directions. One day, he was injured in a chemical explosion because he couldn’t read the label on a bottle of pool chemicals. The explosion burned his face and cost him the vision in one eye. His career as a truck driver was over. That’s when James started the process of learning to read. For the first time, he was able to help his four children with their homework, instead of walking away in embarrassment. Because James didn’t give up, he is now a more confident parent to all of his children.

“The effects of learning to read were more far-reaching than I could have predicted.”

—James
“I’m not done with this journey. I’m going to see how much more knowledge I can receive.”

— Darrell

Darrell did not carry a pen and did not wear his glasses, because he couldn’t read or write. When his company was bought out and went high tech, he wondered what he was going to do, “I either have to learn, or I am going to fail. It is my choice.” He went to a local literacy center and was paired with a tutor. Together they put in over 90 hours in 2011 and continued at that pace. His new goal is to become a volunteer tutor. “I was scared to death and hiding in the shadow of shame, but I’ve accomplished so much. I’ve written a book, received awards, and I owe so much to the people who helped me.”
A FIGHTER
NOT A VICTIM

In his early years, Glen felt like a hostage to the wreckage of his past. His early childhood traumas of being abandoned and sexually abused left deep scars. He didn’t feel good in his own skin. He was an alcoholic by the eighth grade and dropped out of school in the tenth grade. He went to the Second Start literacy program and found help. Glen is now an actor. He has worked with Woody Allen and Nicole Kidman. “There are times as an actor when reading is difficult, but I’ve learned to become vulnerable and ask for help. My life has changed, and I deserve to be happy and not live in self-pity.” Now he sees himself as a fighter, not a victim.

“When most kids were worrying about learning, I was worried about what’s next.” – Glen
Alma’s first teacher thought physical punishment was a way to solve her illiteracy. She connected each slap with reading, and she struggled with reading her whole life. She was picked on in school for not fitting in. In high school Alma fell in love, and was soon pregnant. She was told, “You are a bad influence and cannot graduate on stage.” She took those words to heart and dropped out of school. Through the years, Alma’s children encouraged her to get her high school diploma. The Richmond Public Library Literacy Program gave Alma the tools to pass the test on her first try. Never again will she hear, “You are not going to graduate” and “You’re so stupid.” Those heavy, hurtful words are gone, and I will never feel that way again.

“Never again will I hear, ‘You are so stupid.’” — Alma
YOU HAVE A VOICE

She used to be known as Joyce. Now, she goes by ReJoyce. Her name change reflects a restoration to a life no longer defined by substance abuse and craziness. “It took me until the age of 57 before I told anybody I couldn’t read,” she said. It happened when she went to clean Mr. Jimmy’s house. He wanted her to mop the floors with a certain cleaner that was under the kitchen cabinet. She looked for the cleaner for so long that he came up to Joyce and asked, “Baby, do you have trouble reading?” She replied, “Yes, I do.” She has been working with a volunteer literacy tutor from Read Santa Clara for the past six years. “Now I’m getting help and I’m not ashamed to tell people. I have a voice. And with my voice, I will definitely help others.”

“The weight was lifted when I felt that someone knew my secret and understood.” – ReJoyce
I WAS HIDING A
PAINFUL
SECRET

"There is no shame in not knowing how to read. The shame is in not doing anything about it."

- Cleo

Cleo was bamboozled out of a thriving business by her dishonest business partner because she never learned how to read. She learned how to memorize well and with this technique managed to graduate from high school. Over the years Cleo found ways to hide her secret, but the longer she kept it, the more shame she felt. Cleo finally shared the secret with her family, and she is now on her way to conquering everything that has kept her from succeeding in life. "I owe so much to Goodwill Easter Seals in helping me learn to read. You just can’t imagine what it’s like not being able to read.”
Steve goes to great lengths to hide his illiteracy, including carrying a newspaper and pretending to read it. The stigma associated with his inability to read is embarrassing. “I would rather say that I had a drug problem than admit that I can’t read. People would understand that.” Steve learned to cope by memorizing everything, including street signs, job applications, even eye charts. “You can’t identify an illiterate person by talking with one. I’m smart and resourceful, but I’m lacking one thing. The ability to read. My pain and challenges are invisible. I hide them well.”

“Our society has promised every American that they have a right to read, and yet 36 million people can’t.” - Steve