Volunteering is an act of heroism on a grand scale. And it matters profoundly. It does more than help people beat the odds; it changes the odds. -Bill Clinton

I’ve been working with volunteers for over 20 years now and I can honestly say that in doing so, I believe I have met some of the most selfless, influential, global-minded people who walk the planet today.

If you, as a student in an ABE program, are fortunate enough to have had a literacy volunteer in your life, you know what I’m talking about. You know that a perfect stranger has chosen to spend his or her free time helping you learn English or earn your high school diploma or GED. You have benefited from another perspective, a different focus, a unique skill set that has made your learning richer. You have connected with a person you may never have crossed paths with, a person who wants nothing more from their time with you than to help you reach your goals.

If you are an adult literacy volunteer, you are drawn to this kind of work because you know the value of being a life-long learner. You know that going outside your comfort zone and putting yourself at the same table as someone whose life story is very, very different than yours brings you a level of satisfaction you didn’t know was possible. This experience makes you a different person. It refines your character, softens your sharp edges, and challenges you to think about your ideas and opinions in new ways.
Together, you have changed the course of both of your lives.

As a student, you have that extra help you needed, that patience, that encouragement. You have a person who looks you in the eye and really sees you. Not the country you were born in, your customs, or even your test score, they see you.

As a volunteer, you have learned so much from your students that sometimes you feel you have switched roles completely. That you walk out of school knowing so much more than when you went in. You will never again be able to read an article or hear a newscast about immigration, the working poor, literacy, unemployment, the education gap, refugee camps, war-torn countries, oppression, strife or any related topic without seeing that student that you helped today with a resume, a math problem, an idiom. Things that used to happen only to people on the other side of the world, now happen to someone you know and care about.

That is impact. Sure, there are the numbers, the data, the charts and graphs that clearly show that you have made a difference. But the unseen & incalculable impact of literacy volunteers and the students they work with cannot be quantified. But the quality that has been added to both lives is beyond measure.

I am very grateful and honored to be given this award.

Thanks so much,

Mary Jo Bayliss