

LITERACY

JOY IN HELPING OTHERS LEARN TO READ



Jack Botelho, a volunteer for the Literacy Council of Sarasota, holds a weekly class for adults learning English at Church of the Trinity.

By Ryan Summers
Correspondent

SARASOTA — Street signs, report cards and drive-thru menus are all things we encounter every day, but some people can't read them.

Jack Botelho, 74, a volunteer with The Literacy Council of Sarasota, has been volunteering his time to help people learn how to read, speak and write the English language since 2003.

"It's not a very in your face malady that a lot of people know about," Botelho said. "People are very surprised that their next door neighbor is illiterate."

Botelho holds a weekly "conversation class" Wednesdays at the Church of the Trinity in Sarasota, where he teaches adults from across the globe

the basics of English.

"We do spelling and grammar and reading and speaking and writing. Just about everything there is to do," Botelho said. "In order to help them gain a modicum of proficiency in a language which is not their first language."

Botelho is a student of world vocabularies and said he knows English, Spanish, French, Polish and a smattering of other romance languages.

He said he first realized illiteracy was a problem in America in 1974 when he lived in Hollywood, Florida, and was asked to help a father of three learn how to read.

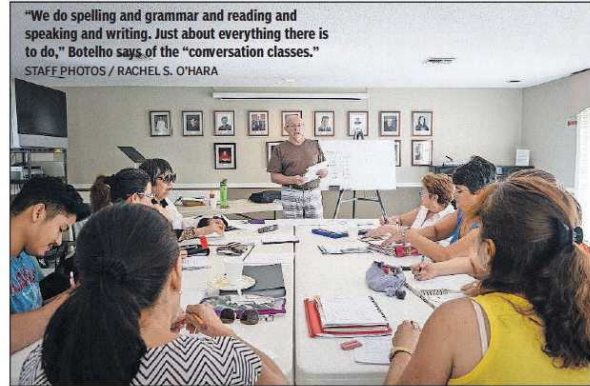
"He would bring home contracts to his wife for her to read and then he would go and do the work because he was absolutely proficient at what he did, but he couldn't read street signs," Botelho said. "A humbling experience for me and hopefully it was a good experience for him."

Botelho said the memory of that man stuck with him and has fueled his volunteering, not only in Sarasota, but in Connecticut where he previously lived.

Botelho started volunteering with the Literacy Volunteers of Greater Hartford before moving to Florida in 2012.

He said he enjoys helping others learn the rudiments of a new language, but continues teaching because of the lessons he has learned.

"I think what sticks out for me most is the wonderful people I have met and when we say that I'm the tutor and they're the learner, that's stretching it a bit because I learn as much from them as hopefully they learn from me," he



said.

"I learn so much from these folks, not only culturally, they come from a different country and they have lots to teach, but also from just a personal standpoint. They have an awful lot to share. I learn as much as they do, maybe more."

Botelho said that while the first interactions with new learners and the intimidation of a new culture might be difficult for both the teacher and the student, universal messages are recognized by all.

"It's sort of this improvisational sign language," Botelho said. "If there is a word that somebody's stumbling over, you sort of do like charades and they get it. And it just simply works."

Botelho's class meets every week

from 9:30 to 11:30 a.m., and he said the conversation class is one of his favorite life experiences.

"It's just about the most rewarding thing that I've ever done," he said.

The Literacy Council of Sarasota

Year founded: 1978

Mission: To improve literacy for adults (16+) in Sarasota County through personalized, needs-based tutoring and small group instruction.

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