The Fall 2026 Issue

# Literacy Advocate

A publication of the Kalamazoo Literacy Council

## Sarah Dingman Finds Her Spark




Sarah came out of homelessness and navigated through tough circumstances, all while discovering something crucial during her time in transitional housing—the ability to regulate her mental health and build a stable foundation. "I survived the hardest part of my life," she reflects with quiet strength.

Today, Sarah works as a Textiles Processor and Donations Attendant at Goodwill Industries of Southwestern Michigan, a job that keeps her grounded while she pursues something deeper. In May 2026, she began volunteering in the Little Scholars Child Development Center, a collaboration with the Adult Education & Training Program at Goodwill. In working with Early Learning Specialist Mr. Mike, she reignited a childhood dream.

"Ever since I was a kid, I wanted the chance to make a difference in a kid's life, and stick with them," Sarah explains. “It’s so special when they recognize you - and I’d be honored to be that person.”

### Building her future

Sarah has enrolled in the Edison Early Childhood Education Career Pathway and is applying to childcare centers. She's been leading group activities, managing projects, and sharing stories with the children. Her own passion for creativity—painting, sculpting, and crafting—brings energy and imagination to the classroom.

### A voice for literacy

Her goals are clear: earn her GED, then pursue her Child Development Associate (CDA) credential in the next two years. She's open to working with any age group, still driven by the same purpose that attracted her to early learning in the first place.

Sarah’s resilience, creativity, and genuine desire to make a difference in children's lives paint a picture of an adult learner who has transformed her own struggles into purpose.



Sarah leads the StoryWalk ®at Family Literacy Day in the Read & Seed Community Garden.

> *“I can do anything!”*
> -Sarah Dingman

Sarah is building the future she always wanted with one child, one story, and one day at a time.

### LOOK INSIDE...

Learners Take Flight in the ExpressWays Academy

15 Years: A Kalamazoo SCRABBLE ®Fest Milestone

Annual Campaign Update

kalamazooliteracycouncil

# President's Message

***By Sarah Bierema***



Dear friends and supporters,

As we move into fall, I find myself reflecting on what has been an exciting and inspiring season for the Kalamazoo Literacy Council. From classrooms and community events to new opportunities for learners, this summer has reminded us once again that everyone deserves the opportunity to read, learn, grow, and reach their goals.

Our summer partnership with ESL of SWMI at Westwood was a wonderful success and we launched the ExpressWays Academy, a new opportunity designed to help learners pursue their individual academic and workforce goals. And, of course, we had the pleasure of celebrating an incredible milestone with our 15th Scrabble Fest! Thank you to everyone who played, sponsored, volunteered, cheered on the teams, and helped make this year's event so memorable.

Now, as we look ahead, we are excited to gather with our supporters at our Fall Reception on October 22. It will be an opportunity to celebrate our learners, recognize the people who make literacy work possible, and honor our 2026 Mard Little Award recipient. We hope you will join us.

**Everyone has a story. Everyone has goals. Everyone needs to read.**

Please consider making a gift to the Everyone Needs to Read Annual Campaign. Your investment helps open doors—to education, employment, independence, confidence, and a stronger future.

Join us in making literacy possible for everyone. Give at kalamazooliteracy.org/donate, share our campaign with someone you know, and help us spread the word: Everyone Needs to Read.

With Gratitude,

Sarah Bierema
President, Board of Directors
Kalamazoo Literacy Council

Volunteer | **Give** | Advocate

**kalamazooliteracy.org**


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***Literacy Advocate*** is published four times a year by the Kalamazoo Literacy Council - a nonprofit organization committed to quality literacy education that enhances the lives of adults through programs designed to strengthen reading, writing, spelling, and comprehension skills.



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MAACAE Michigan Adult, Community & Alternative Education Association

EWA

ExpressWays Academy

**TAKE FLIGHT** *to* **YOUR FUTURE**

We recently launched the ExpressWays Academy, a suite of services designed for highly motivated adults who are working toward an academic achievement like a GED, or pursuing a career goal such as professional certification. Learners have access to a variety of programs, in multiple ways, at multiple sites, so they can chart their course, set their speed, and soar toward their goals!

The first cohort, or "flight", convened in September, with learners seated in classes for math, writing, and Digital Skills. One of the program perks is the ability to study virtually, at one's own pace, using the Aztec online platform or Burlington English software. Program coordinator Tameca Black says, "We wanted to create an environment where adult learners are encouraged and don't feel rushed. Whether someone needs intensive in-person instruction or prefers the flexibility of online learning, we have pathways that work for them."



Tameca Black, ExpressWays Academy Coordinator

Learners are assigned a flight crew, a team of staff and volunteers who offer support and resources throughout the 12-week journey. They can study at Community Literacy Centers in libraries, churches, or housing complexes across the community. Tameca helps them map a flight plan with their study schedule, and everyone abides by a safety agreement with clear expectations.

Beyond academics, the ExpressWays Academy offers career coaching and job placement support to help participants transition their newfound skills into employment opportunities. Instructors work closely with each learner to identify strengths and address specific skill gaps, ensuring that every graduate is prepared for success in their chosen field.



Program participants with flight crew members.

The program's success will ideally resonate throughout the community. As graduates secure employment and advance their education, they become role models and peer mentors for others considering their own educational journeys.

Looking ahead, the ExpressWays Academy plans to expand its offerings and welcome additional cohorts in 2027. The vision is clear: to establish a sustainable model where adult learners consistently find the resources, encouragement, and opportunity they need to transform their lives through education and employment.

To learn more about the program or to enroll your learner, contact Tameca at (269) 382-0490 ext. 253 or tblack@kalamazooliteracy.org.

# Special Events Recap

Kalamazoo Scrabble Fest 15

Presented by: Town & Country Supermarket

Thank you!

**$15k commemorates 15 years:** In August, we celebrated the 15th anniversary of Kalamazoo Scrabble Fest with over 100 players who happily gathered to play for the cause of adult literacy. We greeted new faces and welcomed returning players in the Just For Fun and Competitive Divisions, and cheered on the brave Cage Match contestants. Seven teams, including our Board-sponsored team of learners called "The KLC VIPs," battled for the top spot in that category. It was a great day for a great cause, raising awareness and vital funds needed to continue the important work of literacy skills attainment and English language fluency.



Tournament & Competitive champs with Grand Marshal Corey La Gro.



Kalamazoo College's "Buzzwords" won the Teams division.



The Just For Fun winners included a husband and wife duo.

*Thank you to our sponsors: The Project Group, The Kalamazoo Promise, Humphrey Products, Zoetis, PNC Bank, Modern Woodmen, Schupan, Bronson, First National Bank of Michigan, Blue Horizon Realty Group, Meijer, Mercantile Bank, Hon. Julie Rogers & Dr. Ed Orloff, Moore Electrical, Douglas & Son, Howell, Parfet, & Schau, Paula & Keith Aldridge, NowKalamazoo, Radisson, Allegra, Bell's Brewery, Creative Studio Promotions, Kalamazoo Spice & Tea Merchants, Consumers Credit Union, and Caricatures by Kenjji.*



Wati, an ESL learner, and her daughter examine a seed-sorting activity. Multigenerational strategies position parents as "first teachers" while ensuring both children and caregivers learn simultaneously.



A family enjoys the StoryWalk through the Read & Seed Community Garden.

## Growing readers: Family Literacy Days in full bloom

The 2026 season of Family Literacy Days has been a blast for adult learners, their families, and the community at large. We added more educational elements and even built a Farmers' Market with learning tools for all ages. Partners from the Kalamazoo Public Library, the Nature Center and Kalamazoo Valley Museum lead stations with creative, hands-on activities, and the StoryWalk is a crowd favorite. The entire experience is intentionally centered on building strengths in areas like reading/writing, math, science, and financial literacy. Families leave with new skills, learners gain confidence, and there's a renewed sense of what's possible when learning happens together.

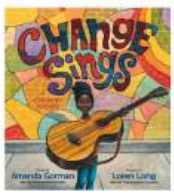
Join us for the final event of the season!

HARVEST FESTIVAL



Wednesday, October 21
5:00 p.m.-7:00 p.m.
420 E. Alcott St.
Kalamazoo, 49001

- Pumpkin painting
- Music
- Free books
- Storytime






Xilyanna shows off her festive creation.

# *Annual Campaign* UPDATE

The 2026 Everyone Needs to Read annual campaign is now in full swing, and your support is essential to keeping these life-changing programs free and accessible to all. Each gift creates an immediate ripple effect across our community. Here are three powerful reasons why your support matters right now:

- **You open doors to employment and economic opportunity**
  Your donation helps fund career coaching, job placement support, programs that help adults get on the path to a GED, and industry credentials that lift families out of poverty.
- **You build stronger families and multigenerational success**
  Empowering an adult learner today sets up the next generation for lifelong achievement.
- **You provide personalized, hyper-local support**
  KLC brings education directly into neighborhoods through libraries, churches, and housing complexes. Your contribution ensures learners have access to resources they need when they need it.




## Help us close the gap!

Scan the code or visit kalamazooliteracy.org to make a secure one-time or recurring gift. Monthly givers will receive an Everyone Needs To Read mug or tshirt featuring campaign artwork.




# Staff & Community News



**Alyssa Smith** officially joined the KLC as a full time staff member after a successful internship as an Empowerment Group Leader. In the role of Volunteer & Internship Coordinator, she will ensure the needs of our volunteers are met and manage the flow of interns during the year. Alyssa graduates from Western Michigan University in December 2026 with a bachelors in social work. She's excited about this position and the possibilities it presents for her to contribute ideas and grow professionally.

**Jackie Woodard** comes on board as a Office Assistant. She will provide direct service to learners at Community Literacy Centers and support the Navigation team.
**Alivia Bennett** is a social work intern and a Parent Literacy Assistant working with Kamaria Snell & KLC families.
**Olivia Perez** joins as Project, Systems, & Environmental Change (PSE) Project Manager on the EDISON project.



## In Memoriam: Louise Robeck

With deep sadness, we reflect on the life and legacy of Louise Robeck. Louise was a beloved member of the KLC family, having spent many years entrenched in the work as a volunteer tutor, Assessor, Board member and Board President from 1998-2000. Her passion for education, thoughtful insights, and genuine care for all learners exemplified the very best of what we stand for. Louise's legacy will continue through the lives she touched and the difference she made in advancing literacy in Kalamazoo county. We are grateful for the time she spent with us and for the meaningful work we accomplished together.

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# kalamazooliteracycouncil

#EveryoneNeedsToRead

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## MISSION:

The Kalamazoo Literacy Council is committed to enhancing the lives of adults by improving their reading, writing, spelling, and comprehension skills.

## VISION:

Empowering adults to reach their full potential.

*Serving Kalamazoo County since 1974.*




Save the date for **Thursday, October 22,** for our annual volunteer appreciation event! The evening is a special opportunity to recognize and recognize adult learners for their hard work and volunteers for their outstanding service.

You'll enjoy dinner and camaraderie, plus an awards ceremony celebrating volunteer service and adult learner excellence. Kindly RSVP by Oct. 19: Scan the code or contact Alyssa Smith at (269) 382-0490 ext. 219 or a.smith@kalamazooliteracy.org.

*Fall Reception*

Scan me



2025 Mard Little Award recipient Antonia Avila & Executive Director Michael Evans.

## Meetings & Events

**Board Meetings:**

October 8, November 12, December 10, 3:00 p.m.-4:30 p.m.

**Family Literacy Day:** October 21, 5:00 p.m.-7:00 p.m.

**Fall Reception:** October 22, 5:30 p.m.-7:00 p.m.

**Adult Literacy Collaborative Meetings:**

October 26, November 23, 12:00 p.m.-1:30 p.m.

**Tutor Orientation & Training:**

November 5, 5:30 p.m.-7:00 p.m., Nov. 14 & 21, 9:00 a.m.-1:00 p.m.