

Tapping the Need

Idaho Trio AmeriCorps Program
Silver Valley Learning Center, North Idaho College
Kellogg, Idaho

Snapshot

It's hardly a glamorous venue. Fluorescent lights illuminate scarred folding tables, metal chairs, and a concrete floor. Aluminum pots sit here and there, strategically placed to catch the leaks from the water-stained ceiling. But the Steelworkers' Hall is centrally located, and the rent is just what the Silver Valley Learning Center can afford: zero.

Nobody pays any attention to the surroundings. Laverne, a retired miner, struggles doggedly with his decimals. Margaret, a 45-year-old waitress, reads aloud to me from an alphabet book, pointing to each word as we go. "Little R had a box. I will fill my box."

Andrea, whose husband brought her to Idaho from the Dominican Republic, pores over a series of questions related to a newspaper article she's just translated. Jessica, a quiet, self-contained high school dropout, works on practice exercises for the social studies component of the GED, pausing occasionally to help her boyfriend Isaac with fractions.

"Little R found r-rabbits and..." Margaret frowns. "Radishes!" she says triumphantly. "He put them into his box."

Don, a blind student, sits in one corner trying to decipher a Louis L'Amour story from an oversized Braille edition while Jonas, his seeing-eye dog, dozes under the table. Every now and then Don cracks a joke that makes Maggie, his volunteer tutor, start to laugh. The Braille western is on loan from an agency Don contacted. Our materials are largely foraged from our sponsoring agency, the Adult Basic Education program at North Idaho College (NIC), but we work with anything we can get our hands on. The dog-eared alphabet books belong to our director's young daughter. We also rely heavily on a series of phonics books Margaret found at the Dollar Store in Coeur d'Alene.

At the moment, nine people bend over the table at the south side of our small office. Sometimes we only have three students on hand. Sometimes we have a dozen. These numbers may appear modest, but our metal file cabinet is crammed with 111 active folders. Faces change hourly as adults come and go to accommodate their various schedules and needs. In a town with a population of about 2,500, we consider our enrollment little short of a miracle.

"Hey." A stocky young man leans in the doorway, then edges forward until he captures the attention of Debbie Johannson, our director. He sticks his chin out. "You Debbie? I need a GED. I heard you guys are where it's at."

Debbie beams. "You sit right down," she says.

Background

I first met Debbie in late 1989 when I drove to the Steelworkers' Hall to interview her for a newspaper article. A new AmeriCorps member, she had just coaxed the Steelworkers' Union to let her install a desk in a large closet in the back of the hall. This was the Silver Valley Learning Center's first office. The tiny space contained the desk, overloaded floor-to-ceiling shelves, a Xerox machine, two Adult Basic Education Students, and Debbie. I wedged myself in with them and noticed yet another occupant: In the corner, Debbie's newborn baby dozed peacefully, oblivious to the commotion.

"Hello!" Debbie said, leaping up and grabbing my hand. "You must be from the newspaper. Let me tell you what we're up to here." She spent the next hour making it clear to me how literacy can change lives. Her speech was effective enough that I later found myself submitting an AmeriCorps application with a view to helping her. With such optimism and confidence, I felt sure she could achieve her goals.

I didn't know the history—that Debbie had just been let go for no apparent reason from a VISTA position at the NIC Learning Center in Coeur d'Alene, a position that she had loved. (The man who made the decision to replace her is no longer with the college.) A cynic might say that the AmeriCorps position in Kellogg had been tossed her way as a compensatory bone.

Debbie is no cynic. "I guess I could have seen it as a demotion. But I decided not to. I told myself, 'Look, they just gave you your own learning center!'"

But she admits that the start-up period, in late 1996, was rocky and sometimes lonely. One day during her first week, feeling blue, she called a friend on staff at the Coeur d'Alene center. "Make it so busy that I have to come over to help you," the friend said.

"I will!" Debbie promised. Hanging up the phone, she looked at the dented metal filing cabinet. At that point, there were just two files in the drawer.

Context

Thanks to the Silver Valley's mining heritage, it would be hard to find a place where the need for Adult Basic Education is greater. Or a tougher challenge.

According to a spokeswoman for the Idaho Department of Education, the national high school dropout rate in 1993-94 (the most recent statistic available when this essay was written) was 4.6 percent. Idaho's statewide dropout rate for the 1996-97 school year was 6.25 percent. I told her that Kellogg's dropout rate is running at about 6 percent for freshmen, more than 11 percent for sophomores, 10 percent for juniors, and not quite 8 percent for seniors. The numbers average out to 8.75 percent. "Boy, that's really high," she said.

Historically, you didn't need an education to make money, big money, in Shoshone County. The Silver Valley has produced more silver than any other mining district in the world. People here in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s say that the South Fork ran yellow, the air reeked of sulfur, and every able-bodied man made money hand over fist. Most of the miners drove brand new 4x4s. Brothels and bars did a booming business. "When you got a certain age, everyone knew you would go to work at the mine. That's just the way it was," says Laverne.

The children and grandchildren of the miners have not, for the most part, been raised to value education, but they must come to terms with a very different world. In the early 1980s the bottom fell out of the U.S. silver market. Mines closed; people left the Silver Valley in droves. The county's unemployment rate skyrocketed to more than 20 percent. (The jobless rate is still grim. The forecasted unemployment rate for February 1998 was 15.5 percent, not the state's highest number, but well up there.) When I moved here in 1989, the area was so depressed that I was able to purchase a perfectly sound two-story house for \$7,500. A friend of mine who'd arrived two years earlier bought her home for \$3,000.

In a further blow to the local economy, Kellogg and surrounding towns inside a 21-square-mile area were declared a Superfund site in 1983—Environmental Protection Agency literature describes it as "one of the largest and most complex abandoned hazardous waste sites in the country." Slowly and painfully, the community began to come to terms with the environmental and human costs of mining, the damage that results from heavy metals contamination. For decades, dust containing heavy metals—especially lead—was pumped into the air by the Bunker Hill Smelter. Mines discharged wastes loaded with lead and other contaminants into the South Fork Coeur d'Alene River, which then swept them downstream to Coeur d'Alene Lake, saturating the flood plains along the way with toxic concentrations of heavy metals: lead, arsenic, cadmium, and zinc.

"At last count, there were around 40,000 Superfund sites in the country. In slightly over half of them, lead is the predominant toxic agent," says Dr. John Rosen, head of the Division of Environmental Sciences at Albert Einstein College of Medicine at Montefiore Medical Center in New York. Rosen, whose lead program has treated over 7,500 children to date, is probably the foremost expert on lead and health in the nation. "I would say, in general, that the effects are devastating to the community."

Rosen explains that the same types of health problems exist anywhere that lead is found. But there's one respect in which Kellogg stands out. "The overall exposure in Kellogg was horrendous, worse than what I've seen anywhere else," Rosen says, citing a study done in the Silver Valley in the early 1970s in which 23 percent of children tested had blood lead levels greater than 80 micrograms per deciliter. Anything over 10 micrograms per deciliter is now considered unsafe.

As far as the Silver Valley Learning Center goes, the most pertinent effect of the contamination is that lead wreaks havoc with the central nervous system, which controls

the ability to learn. “Lead poisoning at significant levels over a period of time interferes with math skills, reading skills, language, and general comprehension,” Rosen says. “It affects cognitive and auditory comprehension, and speed in sequential processing—the quickness of one’s mind. It affects abstract thinking and memory, both essential for learning. It also causes attention deficit and hyperactivity disorders.”

While a person with lead poisoning may not experience all of these effects, he or she will never experience just one, Rosen says. “We’re talking about a constellation of deficits, a mix of some or all of the ingredients. Kids like that need a great deal of help. You’re looking at absenteeism, low class standing. If it’s bad enough, that child will not graduate from high school and will not be productive in the workplace. Period. That’s out. They just can’t handle it.”

Some local educators and health care workers argue that Rosen and others exaggerate the damage heavy metals have caused in the Silver Valley. Rosen claims that’s to be expected. “There’s a lot of denial, which is typical of Superfund sites,” he says. “But you just put in a facility that targets the needs of the affected population and watch what happens. People will come out of the woodwork.”

Positive Impacts

North Idaho College’s outreach efforts to the Silver Valley have been ongoing for at least a decade, but they never met with the degree of success that the Silver Valley Learning Center (SVLC) has enjoyed since it opened in late 1996. Sue Shockley, Interim Director of the Adult Basic Education program at NIC, refers to work in Kellogg as either B.D. or A.D.—before Debbie or after Debbie. “When I first started nine years ago, we had two eight-week evening sessions per year, sometimes three depending on funding,” Shockley said. “Before Debbie—B.D.—I would guess maybe 30 to 40 students a year.”

A VISTA position was also funded. That person’s job involved helping to recruit students for the night classes at the high school, and matching volunteer tutors to students, Shockley said. The Learning Center had no site of its own. Records of results achieved by the VISTA workers are not available, but students with reading levels below fourth or fifth grade were apparently told that no program in Kellogg could help them.

Now the Learning Center doesn’t turn anyone away. Fifty-one percent of SVLC enrollees have reading skills below the sixth-grade level. Only 18 percent of the students in the program are advanced, working at the ninth-to-twelfth grade level. “Even if you start out not knowing the alphabet, you could someday get a GED,” Debbie says. “It doesn’t matter where you start. All that matters is where you end up.”

Several SVLC students have learning disorders that will preclude their making perceptible gains beyond a certain point. The Learning Center welcomes them, too, on the grounds that even a slight gain is better than none. Involvement in the program enhances self-esteem, and working toward goals—even goals as simple as finishing a handout or showing up for a certain number of hours per week—can be a hedge against

depression and related problems such as alcohol abuse and domestic violence, both rampant in Shoshone County.

Over the past 16 months, this inclusive approach has yielded impressive results. Between November 1996 and July 1997 (the end of SVLC's fiscal year) the Learning Center enrolled 28 students. Twenty-two GED tests were taken, and 12 students obtained GEDs. Observing the increased activity, the Steelworkers' Union offered the Learning Center new headquarters, and we came out of the closet into a full-sized office with room for two desks, a computer table, and a work counter for the copy machine.

Between the beginning of July 1997 and the end of March 1998, enrollment swelled to its current 111. Twenty-one GED tests were taken, and five more students obtained GEDs. This number is expected to rise substantially before the end of the next fiscal year because most of our test-taking occurs in the spring. Night GED classes at the high school have been dropped, since everyone's taken to showing up at the Learning Center instead.

I'd been volunteering at SVLC for a year, but in September, when my application was accepted, I signed on as a part-time AmeriCorps member. Mike Shaw joined the program under the AmeriCorps umbrella in November. Additional staffing allowed the Learning Center's hours to expand from Tuesday and Thursday afternoons to 9am to 3pm every weekday. In addition, we're now open on Monday evenings. We hold a three-hour outreach session at the Pinehurst Library every Friday, and visit the Shoshone County jail twice a week. Student contact hours for students who exited the program between July and March: 637. Average number of contact hours per student: 14.

The students are appreciative. Don, the 40-year-old blind student, says the Learning Center gives him one reason to get up and get going in the morning. "The nice thing about this place is that it's free, and a tutor will work with me until I'm able to read well," he says. "I've had tutors before this, but when my money ran out, they did too."

"The Learning Center has helped me a lot," says Andrea, who progressed from a fourth-grade to better than a sixth-grade reading level in the space of eight months. "It's amazing how much I've learned."

Delyle, a 26-year-old inmate at the jail, has eagerly taken advantage of SVLC's outreach tutoring. "It's something to look forward to...a positive thing in my life," he says. "Before this, I couldn't seem to find time to study for the [GED] tests. Maybe I didn't think I was capable of it. Now I know I am."

Not long ago, the president of the Steelworker's Local called Debbie into his office. The summons made her a little nervous. We'd been having a squabble with the church that sometimes rents the Steelworkers' Hall over the placement of our bookshelf. Donated from variety of sources, the Learning Center's lending library is eclectic to say the least, with authors ranging from Janet Dailey to Richard Brautigan. And as the Hall's biggest

non-paying user, the Learning Center automatically occupies the weakest position in any negotiation. But our bookshelf wasn't the topic of the meeting.

"We really believe in what you're doing," the union official said. "We want to keep you happy. We want the Learning Center to stay in this building."

"Oh," Debbie said. She paused. "Really?"

"Really. What can we do for you? What else do you need?"

Rarely at a loss, Debbie did not hesitate. "We could use a computer lab," she said. The request wasn't as preposterous as it sounded. NIC had already earmarked at least six recently replaced computers for our program. The obstacle to the transfer was insufficient wiring and the lack of a secure location for the machines. Two weeks after Debbie's request, the wiring went in along one wall. A student who knew construction drew up a neat plan for lockable desks. It appears that the computer lab will be a reality before summer's end. SVLC has also put in for an additional AmeriCorps member. The goal is to continue to increase enrollment and to begin conducting literacy tests in Silver Valley businesses.

"Do you believe that over 15 million U.S. workers have below an eighth-grade reading ability?" Debbie asks. "It costs businesses two billion dollars a year! We have to make these business owners see how important it is!"

And the crusade continues.

Why it Works

Tutoring at SVLC is a little like waiting tables—you can never predict business. Sometimes you really have to hustle to take care of everyone. In the past few months we've been joined by two more volunteer tutors. Since Christmas, we've tried to make sure that at least two tutors are on hand at all times.

Margaret has gone home. Now I'm working with Landa, a frail diabetic with a learning disorder, and Josh, a 19-year-old rebel whose main interests are chemical warfare and blowing things up. After Landa is securely embarked on her phonics exercise, I encourage Josh to check out the high school chemistry teacher's Internet homepage, in the hope it might foster an interest in more benign applications of science.

In between attending to their needs, I'm thinking about why literacy efforts in Shoshone County have blossomed so dramatically in the past year and a half. "It appears that your learning center has built some nice partnerships with the community. And you've been able to attract some of the lower-level learners who need so much help," said Shirley Spencer, Adult Education Director and GED Administrator for the Idaho Department of Education. I'd called her earlier in the day to discuss the Learning Center. But she threw my biggest question right back at me. "Why do you suppose that is?"

On the back of a discarded handout, I start brainstorming reasons.

1. Fresh from the program at NIC, Debbie had a clear mental model of what a successful center looked like and how it worked. “I keep seeing a place with bright lights, carpet, and computers lined up against the wall,” she told me once. “Lots of students and lots of instructors helping the students.” I think that vision is a big part of what keeps Debbie—and hence, the rest of us—going.
2. The Learning Center manages to be goal-oriented without rigidity. Diagnostic test results provide a clear map of the gap between each student’s current level of ability in each area, and what they need to know to pass the GED. Because we target those gaps, no one feels like they’re wasting time. In addition, we try to make sure that the study program is always in agreement with the student’s own goals—even if that sometimes requires the flexibility of an Olympic gymnast.
3. None of the tutors pretend to have all the answers or to be perfect. Dismayed by the notion of teaching geometry (not his strongest subject), Mike thrust the workbook under the metal screen that separated him from his student at the Shoshone County Jail and said, “Here. You figure out how to do this and teach *me*.” In actuality, they figured it out together. But Mike’s attitude so empowered Ryan, his student, that Ryan now plans to attend college when he’s released. He wants to major in math.

“I like the idea of learning together,” says Debbie. “I think the students learn more. When I was taking the baby to work with me, I didn’t feel bad about not having a babysitter. I felt that the presence of the baby showed people that there are no obstacles. Just because you have a baby, or whatever, doesn’t mean life stops.”

4. Frequent, regular hours in an unthreatening location have proved crucial to enrollment. The Steelworkers’ Hall is a community center that hosts a variety of programs, from a Senior Mealsite to Wednesday Night Bingo. Everyone knows exactly where it is and when to find us there.
5. We let our students know that we want to see them. “See you tomorrow,” we call after each departing student. Even a mumbled “yeah” is a commitment that may make the difference between that person’s showing up or not on the following day.

Every month, we go through the files and pull those with less than five contact hours. Then we call those people. We ask what’s happening in their lives. We tell them we miss them. We encourage them to keep sight of their goals. And unless they’ve moved or found full-time employment, they usually come back.

6. We sell our product. A natural-born saleswoman, Debbie was breaking sales records for Mary Kaye Cosmetics before she embraced literacy as her true cause and calling. This woman can sell anything—even punctuation and story problems.

Those of us who work with her have found ourselves imitating her techniques: upping our energy levels, dealing with students on a more warm and personal level than we otherwise might. We've started phrasing things more positively, adopting a "yes-I-can/yes-you-can" attitude. "You've got to keep repeating it, to yourself and to the students: You can do anything you want to do," Debbie says. At SVLC, every "customer" is important. And most of them buy, because we've got a good product. We're here to sell them on their own futures.

7. Networking has been crucial. Arriving in Kellogg, Debbie immediately volunteered to serve on the boards of the North Idaho Community Express, our public transportation system, and the Center for New Directions, a program that targets women in transition. Inspired by her example, I got involved with the Women's Resource Center, which helps victims of domestic violence. SVLC also facilitates Shoshone County Literacy Council meetings. And everywhere we go, we talk about the Learning Center.

"You have to have a vision," Shirley Spencer told me during the course of our phone conversation. "Beyond that, you have to make connections and get that vision across to other people in the community. And you really have to believe that your students need something, and you're going to do something about it."

We believe that.

As a result of my time at SVLC, I've decided to pursue an M.F.A. in English at Purdue University next fall. I want to study creative writing, but I'm also going to make sure I know the nuts and bolts of teaching composition before I get out, so I can be a more effective proponent of literacy. Mike has committed to a second year at SVLC and with AmeriCorps.

And Debbie—Debbie's not going anywhere. "It's a passion. I can't help it. I don't know where it came from," she says. "As long as the students are learning, I want to keep after it. As long as they're getting their GEDs, I figure we must be doing something right."