

# Lilife

Plus...  
OPTIMUM  
HOMES G21

## Reading rainbow

Literacy success stories —  
from a college-educated immigrant  
to a dyslexic grandfather **G4**

NEWSDAY PHOTO / J. CONRAD WILLIAMS JR.

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explore **LI**

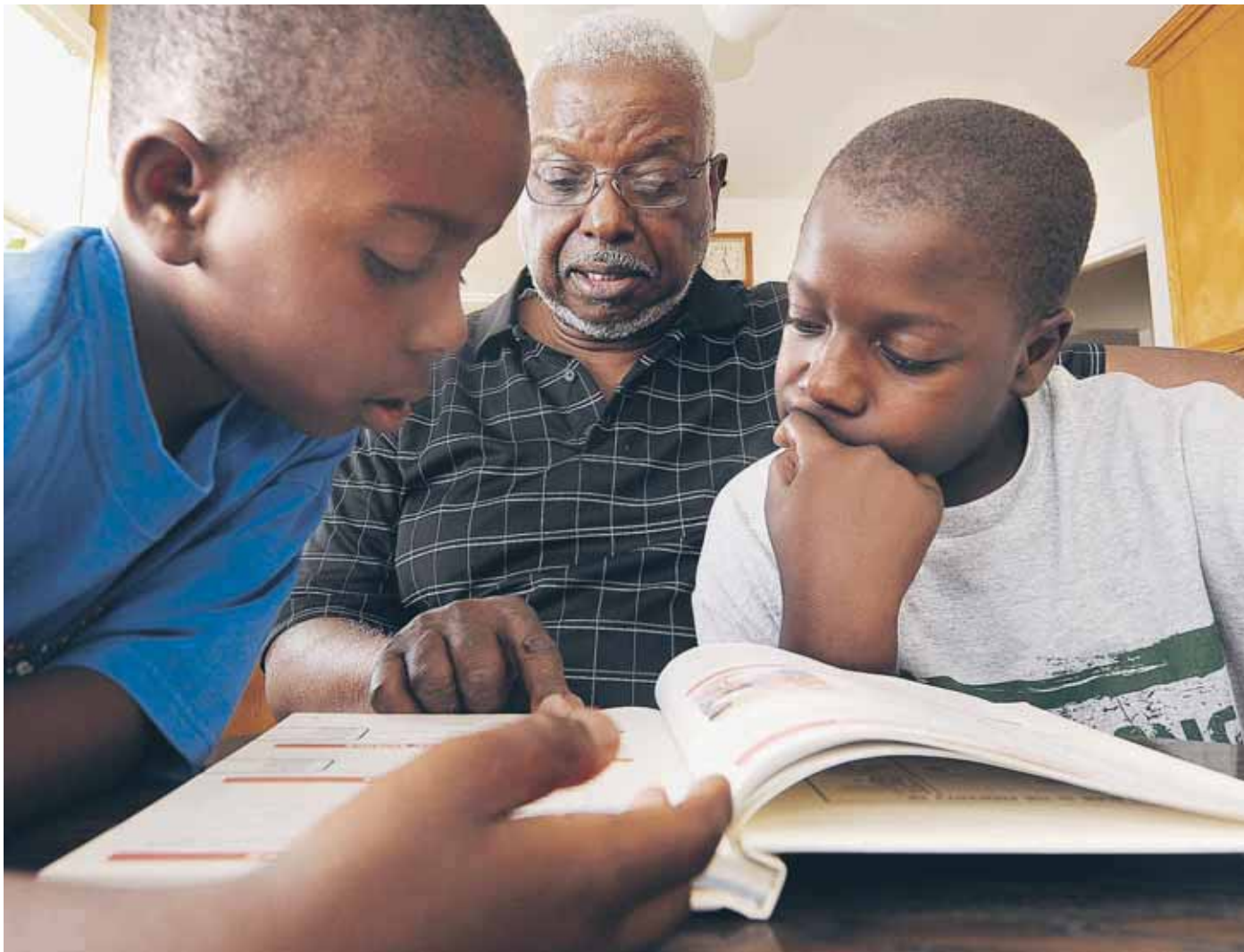
10 TOP THINGS TO DO THIS WEEK

4-PAGE PULLOUT

# Spreading the word



LI's literacy **success stories**  
bridge generations and cultures



Retiree Johnny Gilchrist, 69, started learning how to read in 2003 and now helps his grandsons, Sean, 6, and Graig Peavy, 9.



BY JOHN HANC  
*Special to Newsday*

**I**nstructed to read aloud the caption of a photograph showing golfers on a lush fairway, the student hesitates, furrows her brow and begins to speak.

"They . . . enjoy . . . playing . . . gor-uf."

"That's 'golf,'" says the teacher, gently correcting the student. "Remember the 'l' sound."

The student nods, tries again.

"Gol-uf."

"One more time. Look at my mouth and see the way my tongue moves when I say it. 'Golf.'"

She takes a deep breath. "Gol . . . ff."

**ON THE COVER**

Sook Hee Kim is tutored by Elinor Haber at Syosset Library.



PHOTOS BY AGATON STROM

Daniel Raffaele, 31, a native of Brazil, studies reading comprehension at the group home where he lives. His motivation: to read about baseball in the newspaper. Literacy Nassau honored him in May as its Most Dedicated Student.

“Much better!”

The student smiles.

When school is in session, it's a familiar scene in many Long Island libraries: Middle and high school students preparing for exams, getting one-on-one help from a tutor. But the pair working together at the Jericho Public Library on a recent Friday morning were not cramming for Regents exams.

The student is Sook Hee Kim, 62, a university graduate in her native South Korea who, after 26 years of living in the United States, is now determined to elevate her English skills from passable to near-perfect.

The tutor is Elinor Haber, 66, a retired New York City high school teacher and BOCES administrator.

They were brought together through Literacy Nassau, an organization that helps people like Sook Hee who want to improve their English speaking and reading skills. The Freeport-based not-for-profit currently has 439 students — from 40 countries — working with 340 volunteer tutors, most of them, like Haber, retired educators.

Besides the fact that the tutor services are provided without cost, what makes Literacy Nassau attractive to many is that the curriculum can be tailored to meet individual need. For a student newly arrived in this country, that might mean achieving basic literacy in English.

Having run a dry-cleaning business in Woodbury with

her husband for two decades, Sook Hee is able to make herself understood in English. But now, in the words of one of those colloquial expressions she's trying to master, she's raising the bar.

“I want to talk in English to my neighborhood . . . uh . . . my neighbors,” she says correcting herself, as Haber, sitting next to her, smiles and nods. “Also, I want communication with my grandson. I want to give him good advice for life — in English!”

“I got involved in the program because I wanted to use my experience and skills to work one-on-one with motivated students,” Haber says.

The motivations of the students who come to Litera-

See LITERACY on G6





Elinor Haber, a Literacy Nassau tutor, helps South Korea native Sook Hee Kim as she reads a children's book to improve her English skills.

NEWSDAY PHOTOS / J. CONRAD WILLIAMS JR.

# Brought together, word by word

## LITERACY from G4

cy Nassau for help vary, however, as do their backgrounds and circumstances.

Brazil native Daniel Raffaele, 31, moved here as a child but never learned to read English. One of the supervisors at the Levittown group home where he lives recommended Literacy Nassau. Raffaele, a big baseball fan, was frustrated at his inability to read the sports pages of the newspaper. He went to the organization and was matched with a tutor, Frank Celentano, from nearby East Meadow.

"I couldn't read, I had problems understanding words," Raffaele recalls. "I said, 'Can you please help me?' He said, 'I will definitely help you.'" That help required effort on

Raffaele's part — and he was up to the task. Since last July he has worked more than 70 hours with his tutor.

"That's a lot of hours in a volunteer situation," says Literacy Nassau executive director Karen Micciche. "It's rare that you get students who meet every single week. It's a

tribute to Frank and Daniel."

The organization paid further tribute to Raffaele for his long hours, when in May, during the group's annual awards ceremony, he was recognized as Most Dedicated Student.

Not all of those served by Literacy Nassau are nonnative English speakers. Growing up in

Montgomery, Ala., after World War II, Johnny Gilchrist said, he "had a hard time in school. I wasn't a problem child, I just had difficulties with words and communicating."

Gilchrist, now 69, never learned to read, although he hid that fact well and was able to raise a family and hold down a

job. After moving to Roosevelt, he worked at a supermarket warehouse, where he stayed for 28 years before retiring about eight years ago.

## Wants to help grandkids

"You learn to adapt," said Gilchrist, explaining how he managed to hold a job without revealing his illiteracy. "You learn to pay attention and work around it."

In 2003, Gilchrist, who lives in Roosevelt, was visiting the local library with his grandchildren when he heard about Literacy Nassau and decided that after hiding his handicap all his life, he was going to overcome it. "I wanted to be able to help my grandkids with their homework," he said.

Gilchrist was tested and found to have dyslexia, a learn-

## Become a student or tutor

**S**tudents interested in studying through Literacy Nassau should call 516-867-3580 for an appointment. "They don't need anything except a willingness to learn," says executive director Karen Micciche. Services are free and open to anyone 16 and over who is not enrolled in school. Although prior teaching experience is not a requirement, volunteer tutors must take a

comprehensive Tutor Training Workshop, which consists of 12-18 hours and a small (under \$80) textbook and materials fee. "We take our training very seriously," Micciche says. "We expect our volunteers to treat this as a job, not a hobby."

More information is available at:  
[literacynassau.org](http://literacynassau.org)  
[literacysuffolk.org](http://literacysuffolk.org)

In one-hour sessions at a library, Haber works with Sook Hee, who, after 26 years here, wants to improve her English from passable to near-perfect.

ing disability rendering him unable to properly recognize and process certain symbols and images into language.

Now he knew the reason for his inability to read — and with the help of his tutor, Carol Davan of Melville, he attacked the problem, diligently attending weekly sessions and doing his homework. He can now read a letter, a page in a book, an article in a newspaper. Gilchrist is quick to add, however, that his work is not done.

“I’ve never read a complete book,” he said. “That’s still a goal.”

#### Their mission: help others

Inspired by his own experience, he now serves on Literacy Nassau’s board of directors. His particular mission, he says, is to raise awareness about the problem he wrestled with most of his adult life: According to Literacy New York, 22 percent of adult New Yorkers are illiterate.

“People take the ability to read for granted,” Gilchrist said.

After retiring from Pall Corp. in 2007, Judy Angelbeck was eager to get involved in tutoring.

“Education certainly changed my life,” says Angelbeck, who lives in Huntington Station and has a doctorate in cell biology. “I can hardly imagine anyone trying to get by without being able to read or write. So I wanted to give back.”

She volunteered with Literacy Suffolk and was matched with Raogo Niekima, a native of Burkina Faso in Africa, who has lived in the United States since 2002. “I wanted to learn how to read and how to speak English,” says Niekima, 37, who also lives in Huntington Station and works two jobs.

Angelbeck began meeting with Niekima in the local library. “We literally started with the alphabet,” the tutor recalls. Niekima worked diligently and, despite a brutal work schedule, met consistent-



ly with his tutor for two hours a week.

Now, 2½ years since their initial meeting, he says, “I’m reading the paper, writing letters. She has helped me a lot.”

For Angelbeck, the experience has been everything she hoped for, as well. “It’s so amazing to see the world open up for someone who just learns to read,” she said. “There’s nothing more pivotal to changing your life. I’m very proud of him.”

Literacy Nassau and Suffolk are two of 36 affiliates of the umbrella statewide group Literacy New York, which was founded under a different name in 1974. According to Gini Booth, executive director of Literacy Suffolk, there are 453 active students with 319 active tutors in her chapter. There are also 623

students on the wait list. The problem for Suffolk, she says, “is that the geography is different [than Nassau’s]. It’s huge . . . a much wider area.”

#### Proximity helps

Hence, it’s difficult to find tutors who are near all the students who want their services. In Nassau, geography often plays a role in student/tutor pairings. Like Raffaele and Celentano, proximity led to the pairing of Sook Hee, who lives in Syosset, and Haber, who resides in Jericho.

While Haber has been certified by Literacy Nassau as a tutor and has a mentor on staff she can go to for advice, the veteran teacher is given wide latitude in how she designs the lessons.

As Sook Hee likes to golf,

Haber printed out pages from a website promoting golf resorts for her to practice with. So that Sook Hee can better read to her 2½-year-old grandson, Haber is introducing her to children’s books, including that venerable classic “Curious George,” a reading that concludes their 60-minute session this week.

The particular passage Sook Hee is reading today is about George’s day at the beach and his encounter with a crab, and it reveals some of the challenges facing learners of the often confounding language we Americans speak:

“George sees a . . .” Sook Hee pauses. “Ca-rab.”

“Crab.”

“Crab. With a shell and two . . .” Sook Hee pauses. “Claws?”

“Yes, claws, good.”

Sook Hee looks up at Haber, puzzled. “Claws? Like Santa Claus?”

The teacher smiles.

“Very good, Sook Hee. They sound the same, but are written differently. Santa Claus is Christmas!”

Sook Hee laughs, but one senses how frustrating the nuances of English can be. Still, Haber says Sook Hee’s improvement in just two months is significant, and she is confident that when Sook Hee takes the standardized language test (probably in about eight months) needed to complete her program, she will do well.

“She hears me read the sentences aloud and says, ‘I want to read like you do.’ I tell her, ‘Sook Hee, I can’t speak a word of Korean. So you’re well ahead of me!’”