

WINNING ESSAY PROMPTS STUDENT OF YEAR LITERACY HONOR

Kidwell learned to read starting just 2 years ago

by Catherine Harrison

Two years ago, Kinship Road resident Joann Kidwell couldn't read even a newspaper - but now she is reading novels. Her reading, writing and math skills have skyrocketed, thanks to Kidwell's hard work and the classes she has taken at Literacy Works Inc., a literacy nonprofit based in Baltimore.

Kidwell, 63, is Literacy Works' Student of the Year. She also is the third-prize winner of an essay contest sponsored by Women Expanding/Literacy Education Action Resource Network (WE LEARN), a national organization that promotes the literacy of women.

Winning the essay contest is part of what prompted Literacy Works to give Kidwell its top honor. While its board of directors typically selects the Student of the Year, this year "we thought it was appropriate to recognize [Kidwell] locally," executive director Helene Waranch said.



Joann Kidwell, answering the phone at her desk, was named Literacy Works' Student of the Year. *photo by Catherine Harrison*

"Every once in a while I have to pinch myself," Kidwell said. "Is this real?"

She never graduated high school. Her cerebral palsy forced her to attend a special needs school as a child. The school prioritized physical therapy over academics, Kidwell said. Teachers didn't believe that she could learn scholastics. Society at large, including some family members, didn't believe it either.

In her prize-winning essay, "My Experience," Kidwell wrote, "People, especially women, need to be accepted by society, loved by their peers and honored as human beings in spite of their physical disabilities."

Kidwell found love and acceptance from her husband, Donald, whom she met when both were working at the League for the Handicapped in Baltimore. But her family opposed their marriage.

"They thought that since I was, according to them, a physically limited person that I could not deal with the daily duties of being a wife as well as the emotional ups and down[s]," she wrote in her essay. But, she said, she has been happily married for 36 years.

However, Kidwell said her lack of education affected her self-esteem. For most of her life, she did not work outside of her home. "I'm a feisty person, though," she said. "I'll keep going as long as the doors are open - I'm going to go through them."

She started taking classes at Literacy Works two years ago. The organization, founded in 1990, has 11 learning centers in Baltimore open to anyone age 16 or older. The Essex center that Kidwell attends employs two part-time teachers, one who teaches basic skills and another who helps prepare students for the General Equivalency Diploma (GED) test.

Kidwell has two goals: to earn her GED and to write her autobiography. "I'm keeping most of my energies toward writing. I love writing," she said.

She wants to use her autobiography to educate society about people with special needs. Also, she wants to help bring additional funds to Literacy Works so that more people can be reached.

"I have been involved in so many different programs that have folded up, and I had to begin and begin and begin, but now I've finally found a place where I can begin and keep on going," Kidwell said.

Waranch added, "Nationally, over 40 percent of the population does not have the [academic] skills to be able to function fully at work or with their family or in the community."

Kidwell wants to give back to the community that has given her so much. Not only is Kidwell a student at Literacy Works, but she also is an employee.

Through the Baltimore County Department of Aging's Senior Aides program, Kidwell began working at Literacy Works part-time in 2004. The program offers employment with a nonprofit or government agency to low-income county residents age 55 and older. Over a two-year period, participants are trained and supervised to better prepare them for unsubsidized employment.

Kidwell works as a receptionist for Literacy Works. She hopes to find full-time employment soon, but for now she is basking in her accomplishments.

Kidwell and Johnson tried to arrange for Kidwell to travel to New Haven, Conn., for the WE LEARN awards ceremony, but "to get to New Haven, for somebody in a wheelchair, is nearly impossible," Waranch said. "That was probably the inspiration [for] why we started the awards celebration."

The Literacy Works celebration, held on June 7 at the Randallstown Library, honored Kidwell and 41 other deserving students. Students who attended at least 85 percent of classes received a certificate, as did those who had improved academically. Kidwell received attendance and academics certificates in addition to her Student of the Year award.

Previously, the student award was part of a fund-raising event. Waranch said that the board of directors was pleased with the ceremony and planned to make it an annual celebration.

"It took me 63 years to find the Literacy Works program, where I am treated as a friend and as an equal," Kidwell wrote. "Time has made me emotionally complete, as a human being and a woman."