Casting Aside Shame And Stigma, Adults Tackle Struggles With Literacy

AUDIE CORNISH, HOST:

Thirty-five million - that is the number of adults whose reading skills are below those of fourth graders in this country. That translates to 1 in 6 U.S. adults. And 35 million is the starting point for today's story in our series Take A Number, which focuses on problems around the world through the lens of a single number. NPR's Melissa Block visited a literacy program in Maine that is trying to chip away at that daunting statistic.

MELISSA BLOCK, BYLINE: At the tiny public library in Winterport, Maine, Robert Hartmann bends over a book and gets to work.

ROBERT HARTMANN: Chug. Right?

SANDY DELUCK: Yeah.

HARTMANN: Chug. Chug. Puff.

BLOCK: He's a burly guy with five facial piercings, his arms inked with tattoos. This is his second session with volunteer tutor Sandy DeLuck.

HARTMANN: Her car - cars...

DELUCK: Cars.

HARTMANN: ...Were filled - yeah, filled, right?

DELUCK: Yeah.

HARTMANN: Full of good things for boys and girls.

DELUCK: Yes. Perfect. Cars were full of good things for boys and girls.

BLOCK: At age 43, Robert Hartmann reads at about a first-grade level. He did manage to graduate from high school, worked in mills and factories. Now, with a bunch of physical and mental health issues, he's unemployed. And to keep his government benefits, he's required to take literacy classes. He'd also like to be able to read to his young children.

DELUCK: All right. Very good. It was nice to see you again.

HARTMANN: Mm-hm.

BLOCK: Hartmann was matched with his tutor through the small nonprofit Literacy Volunteers of Bangor. The program serves a mostly white, working-class community. In the U.S., most adults with low literacy are native-born English speakers. And of those, most are white. Nationwide adult illiteracy has proved an intractable problem linked to stubborn societal issues like poverty and failing schools. In fact, adult literacy rates are no better than they were 25 years ago.

MEREDITH EATON: We know low literacy is, you know, a generational cycle.

BLOCK: That's Meredith Eaton, program manager with Literacy Volunteers of Bangor. What's more, she says the stigma of low literacy can be paralyzing.

EATON: If they were made to feel like they could not learn - unfortunately, people have honestly been told this. And it breaks my heart.

CINDY DUELL: After you tell somebody so long that you're dumb, they believe it.

BLOCK: Growing up in Maine, Cindy Duell heard that message all the time. But as long as she showed up in class, she was passed through from year to year until she got pregnant in 10th grade.

DUELL: I was told that pregnant women didn't belong in school by my principal. So then I said, OK, here's your books. See you later.

BLOCK: Wow. 10th grade.

DUELL: Tenth grade.

BLOCK: Later, even though she could only read and write at a basic level, Duell earned her high school diploma through adult ed and got certified as a nursing assistant thanks to a lot of memorization. And she figured out other ways to compensate. When her sons were young, she'd fake it. She'd open a kids' book but make up stories. In her hospital job, she'd swap tasks. She would lift and wash the patients if her co-workers would fill out her paperwork. And she relied heavily on her husband, Lee, for help until he finally convinced her to call and sign up for tutoring.

DUELL: I wrote this on 3/11/18.

BLOCK: Cindy Duell pulls out her homework binder and opens to an essay she's written in pencil in a lopsided cursive. The assignment? Write about something you've never told anyone.

DUELL: I never told anyone I could not read, write or spell. It's been my secret for 51 years. I have never told my sons. I...

BLOCK: For the past 18 months, Cindy Duell has been working with tutor Claire Levesque.

DUELL: She's awesome. She - first thing she said to me is, I do not use red ink. It was awesome because you look at your paper, and you got nothing but red, all these red things, that wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong.

CLAIRE LEVESQUE: I use purple, just purple.

BLOCK: These tutoring sessions aren't just about mastering phonics and parts of speech. The idea behind the program is build skills that might help adults get a better job or become self-sufficient.

DUELL: I went and filled out an application all by myself to get a new car.

LEVESQUE: Perfect.

DUELL: I was approved. I did it all by myself.

LEVESQUE: When was the last time you did that?

DUELL: I've never done that. Lee's always done it.

LEVESQUE: Yeah (laughter).

DUELL: (Laughter).

BLOCK: Like many adult literacy programs, this one gets no government funding. It relies on grants and private donations. Literacy Volunteers of Bangor serves several hundred students a year for free, and there's always a waiting list. When executive director Mary Lyon makes her pitch to donors who ask for metrics - like, how much have students' scores improved? What grade levels have they reached? - she answers more holistically.

MARY LYON: So we can say, all right, we could do that for you. But instead, this is what we're able to provide. This number of people got a better job. This number of people voted for the first time. I can give you a grade, or we can talk about life. And they're like, nah, this is great. (Laughter) This makes sense.

BLOCK: And it makes great sense to Cindy Duell.

DUELL: I just needed somebody that could listen and want to help me. It's like opening up a Christmas present every day. It's just awesome.

BLOCK: Every day, Duell reads out loud with her cats and dogs gathered around her. She's catching up on books she missed out on growing up - Anne Frank's "Diary Of A Young Girl," Steinbeck's "Of Mice And Men."

DUELL: And that was good. I loved that, "Of Mice And Men." And that took me a while.

BLOCK: And in a corner of her living room, Cindy Duell has shelves lined with more books - Stephen King, Sue Miller, Alice Munro.

DUELL: Those are wish books. I'm working up to them.

BLOCK: When you look at that bookcase over there filled with your wish books, the books that you're hoping to read some day, what is that like for you?

DUELL: It's a little overwhelming. But I know that there will be a day that I'll have all those books read. There will be a day.

BLOCK: Melissa Block, NPR News, Bangor, Maine.

(SOUNDBITE OF PERFUME GENIUS' "LEARNING")