

Sandy Reed

Age: 59

Education: B.A., Journalism,
Kansas State University

Marital status: Married

Volunteer Work: Chairman,
Board of Directors,
Friends of Vision Literacy

Former Occupation: Journalist

Residence: Saratoga



You started volunteering after retiring from a successful career in journalism. Why now?

When I was working as a newspaper editor, the code of ethics prohibited journalists from actively participating in any advocacy because of the possibility of a perceived bias. Reporters and editors couldn't put bumper stickers on their cars, wear t-shirts that promoted a cause or participate in public events for or against anything.

At one magazine, we couldn't even own stock in any technology company whether or not we were likely to write about the company. I also didn't think I had enough time to be a volunteer while I was busy making a living.

That's not true, of course, but I didn't realize it until I became a volunteer in 2002 after I retired. I have always given financial support to causes that I believe in. That's okay but it's not nearly as rewarding as experiencing first-hand what it's like to help someone change their life for the better.

Why did you choose Vision Literacy?

After I retired, I knew that I wanted to become active in the community. So I researched the many nonprofit organizations that needed volunteers. There are so many truly worthy causes that it was a major research project.

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As a journalist, I had a natural affinity for the mission of Vision Literacy--teaching basic reading, writing, math and computer skills to adults. In addition, Vision Literacy is one of the few nationally accredited literacy programs in this area and it provides services from my hometown library in Saratoga, as part of the Santa Clara County Library.

How is Vision Literacy making a difference?

Every day, Vision Literacy volunteers are making life better for others. Learners are getting their drivers licenses, being promoted, getting new jobs and even starting their own businesses because their tutors helped them learn to read and write better.

Last year, I was part of a group of tutors who worked with employees of the Toll House Hotel in Los Gatos. We helped the restaurant and housekeeping workers communicate better with each other, with their bosses and with hotel guests. One of the waiters was so encouraged at making progress that he enrolled in a community college "English as a Second Language" class.

Also last year, I was among a group of tutors who went to the Center for Employment Training in San Jose. We helped the women master the skills they need to get jobs in licensed child care facilities.

Why is "giving back" good for our health and the nation?

When you "give back" to someone, you help them open doors that they couldn't open alone. Every learner who votes for the first time makes this a better country. Everyone who learns to read to their child creates a richer life for themselves and their child.

In health terms, specifically, every learner who can read a prescription label and take their medicine correctly for the first time is making this a healthier nation. Every person who learns to use a computer and connects to the Internet for the first time is advancing our society.

How is “living longer” changing our society?

The longer people live, the more stereotypes disappear. Instead of slowing down with age, people are going back to school, starting new careers, taking lessons and trying new things. There’s an old newspaper saying that the single, shortest description you can provide about anyone is their age.

I’m not sure that’s true anymore. I personally have friends who are decades younger than I am and friends who are decades older. Personally, I loved my career as a journalist but also always wondered what it would be like to be a teacher.

When I left the paid workforce and became a tutor, I got a taste of teaching when I went through the tutor training process at Vision Literacy.

How do you stay active?

Mentally, I stay active by reading books and two daily newspapers cover to cover everyday, working puzzles of all kinds and playing video games. Until I retired, I had never attempted a crossword puzzle. Now I’m able to complete the most difficult crosswords that the *New York Times* prints.

I’m also addicted to a computer game called Star Collector. I’ve been playing it for years and have amassed more than 80 million points. Physically, I walk (mostly with my dog) and take aerobics and fitness classes at the gym.

I love walking the trails at Vasona Park in Los Gatos and hiking at Sanborn Park and in the Fremont Older Open Space Preserve near my home. Since I’m turning 60 next year, I have set a



Sandy Reed with learner Modesto Miguel and tutor Sue Cohen

goal to be in as good a shape at 60 as I was when I was 40 years old.

Who inspires you?

My step daughter, Julie Valdez, is an elementary school principal in Piedmont. Being an educator today in California is extremely challenging but Julie manages to inspire her staff, her students and her stepmother. She taught me to be a better tutor and a better advocate for literacy.

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What are you most passionate about?

Thanks to Alejandra Limon, whom I tutored through Vision Literacy, I have become passionate about cake decorating. When I told my mother that I was taking classes and learning how to bake and decorate cakes, she was shocked because I had never shown an interest in baking.

The only reason I took up the hobby was because Alejandra asked for help reading and assess-

ing cake recipes and reading about decorating techniques. She suggested we take a class together because she didn’t think her English skills were good enough to understand the instructor on her own.

We ended up taking 15 classes and developed skills good enough to bake and decorate a book-shaped cake for Vision Literacy’s 20th anniversary celebration.

On the light side, I’m a rabid sports fan. I’ll watch any sport except boxing (too violent). My husband wasn’t a sports fan at all until after we were married nearly 25 years ago. My enthusiasm has rubbed off on him a bit and we often watch sports together.

On the serious side, I’m outraged by inequality of any kind. One of the reasons I love California in general and Santa Clara County in particular is because of diversity. I love experiencing

various cultures through food and the arts. Every time I visit relatives in my hometown in the middle of the country, I gain a new appreciation of how rich my life is in the patchwork quilt of an area that I now call home.

So are you saying that there’s at least as much benefit for the volunteer as for the beneficiary?

Beyond any doubt. I’ve benefited enormously from tutoring – maybe, in fact, more than the learners.