

Adult illiteracy film hits home in this county

By Pat Murphy
staff writer

Luckily for film critics, Barbara Seaton doesn't get angry easily.

"I really didn't like the reviews they gave it," said Seaton, referring to the panning critics gave "Stanley & Iris," a film that opened last week at area theatres.

"The movie deals with a real problem," she said. "And it offers a workable solution."

The problem is adult illiteracy. The solution is one-on-one tutoring. Seaton knows about both. The 38-year-old mother of five raised her reading skill from near zero to the fifth grade level by participating in a tutoring program sponsored by the Oakland Literacy Council through the Oakland Intermediate School District.

"Barbara knew the alphabet, her name, address and phone number," recalled her tutor, Diana Murray of Farmington Hills. "And that was it."

Now Seaton, who wants to be a chef, is in her second semester studying culinary arts at Oakland Community College. She also works in the kitchen at the Palace of Auburn Hills.

AND WHILE SHE'S credit hours away from being a college-certified chef, Seaton said she knows a good movie when she sees it — even if critics put it down.

Dan Greenberg, film critic for the Observer & Eccentric newspapers, calls "Stanley & Iris" "unbelievable. Worse yet, he said the film . . . is just too boring for words."

Seaton saw the televised review of Roger Ebert, critic for The Chicago Tribune.

The film "provides insight into the lives of people battling illiteracy," acknowledges Ebert. But despite good acting, the director and screen writers . . . have not found a way to make illiteracy real.

"Thumbs down," said Ebert. As one who has a reading on illiteracy, Barbara Seaton says "thumbs down to Ebert."

"People (including critics) really don't understand people who can't read," said Seaton, who came to Pontiac from Arkansas in 1971. "They're insecure. They feel inadequate. And they're embarrassed."

Seaton said she tried normal adult education classes, but without success. "The minute you ask the teacher about a word, she wants you to sound it out," Seaton said. "And pretty soon everybody was looking at me."

THAT DOESN'T HAPPEN with a private tutor. "She (for me) makes you sound it out, but there's nobody else around to look at you."

Seaton said learning to read was

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Barbara Seaton shows the chocolate castle and flowers she made as part of her culinary arts program at Oakland Community College.

RANDY BORSI/staff photographer



STEVE CANTRELL/staff photographer

Tutor Eleanor Robertson thinks increased technology will force society to confront adult illiteracy.

Adults touchy about illiteracy

By Pat Murphy
staff writer

Illiteracy is a touchy subject to those who can't read, according to two people in a position to know.

So touchy they usually refuse to acknowledge their deficiency to closest friends, spouses or — very often — themselves, according to Eleanor Robertson and Diana Murray, two professional women who provide tutoring service through the Oakland Literacy Council.

"You would be amazed at the tricks they devise to conceal their inability to read," said Robertson, a former Royal Oak teacher who now lives in Bingham Farms. "They're intelligent," she said. "And often capable of compensating in other areas, such as physical abilities or hands-on skills."

"But somewhere along the line they didn't get the training they needed to read, write and spell," Robertson said. "All three skills are interrelated."

ROBERTSON HAS TUTORED two adults, a man and a woman, who live in the Troy-Birmingham-Bloomfield area.

"She asked that no other specifics about her students be included in this story, lest they feel stigmatized."

"That's how sensitive they are," said Robertson.

Murray of Farmington Hills also cautioned against using any description — direct or otherwise — that would identify somebody struggling with illiteracy.

In the four years she has been a tutor, Murray helped two adults. Her first — Barbara Seaton — is exceptional in several ways, including her willingness to talk about her illiteracy. (See related story.)

Although she once felt shame at not being able to read — and it's still a source of embarrassment to at least one of her children — Seaton said she is willing to talk about her own illiteracy because of the object lesson she provides.

"If I can learn, anybody can," Seaton is fond of saying.

'They're intelligent . . . But somewhere along the line they didn't get the training they needed to read, write and spell.'

— Eleanor Robertson
reading tutor

Murray's second student, however, feels acute embarrassment.

Rather than take the chance of adding to that embarrassment, Murray identified her student as "a very intelligent person" trying to overcome a handicap.

"I WILL TELL you this," Murray said. "This student fell through the cracks at a very affluent school system."

"It's easy to believe that most people who can't read are like Barbara — black and from the South," she said. "But illiteracy hits every level. You'd be surprised."

Robertson speculated that illiteracy is becoming more apparent in society because of the changing economic situation.

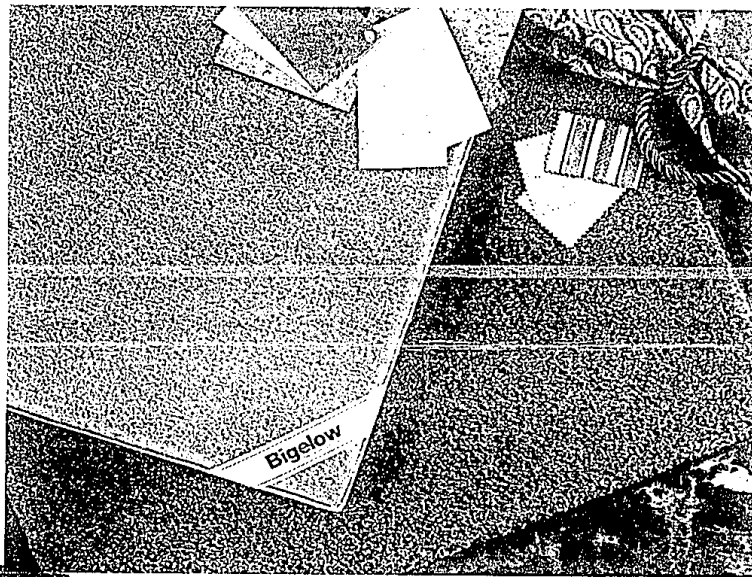
"As jobs become more high tech, there are fewer jobs for people who can't read," she said. "There are fewer places to hide. People too often decide to do something about their illiteracy after they've been embarrassed, or lost a job because of it."

People who can't read get tripped up when they have to take a telephone message or cash a check.

"I used to get angry with parents who seemingly didn't care enough to respond to a message I'd send home with a child," Robertson said. "Now I wonder how many of those parents couldn't read the message, much less respond to it."

Non-readers can't feel entirely comfortable at house parties or social situations, Robertson said. "Too often somebody will want to play a word game (like Trivial Pursuit). It's not fun to be in that situation."

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