

Our Shared Humanity:

A Collection of Stories
from Siena Literacy Center

Edited by Sr. Lenore Boivin, O.P.

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*Dedicated to the Dreamers, the Believers,
the Outsiders, and the Strugglers.
Here, everyone belongs.*

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Foreword

Literacy matters. It humanizes us and bonds us through the shared experiences of the written word and makes it possible for us to be full participants in the life and opportunities of our community. Literacy matters because being unable to read can be isolating and defeating, leaving many on the outside struggling to get in. That is why the mission of Siena Literacy Center has always been to provide adult learners with the means to improve their reading and math skills, thereby enabling them to “break through” and take full advantage of all that life has to offer. While many of our writers bring a singular point of view to this struggle in their stories, they have each in their own way come to Siena to realize their best self, to find their voices in a challenging world, and stake their claim on their own humanity. They have shared their experiences in this publication and invite you to join them on their journey.

Sharon Mills, Tutor

Acknowledgement

This project was made possible by a 2022-2023 Ministry Grant from the Immaculate Heart of Mary Sisters in Monroe, Michigan. A very special thank you to Sr. Mary Anna Riley, longtime staff member and adult literacy advocate, for her sponsorship and guidance throughout the project. I would also like to extend my immense gratitude to volunteer tutors Sharon Mills and Anne Van Amerongen, for your years of dedicated tutoring services and for taking time to support this project that helped lift the voices of our learners. Thanks is also due to the many tutors who adapted their weekly sessions with learners to accommodate the gathering of these stories. To the learners who so courageously and honestly shared their life stories so that others may be in the know and grow, thank you for welcoming us in. And to Sr. Lenore Boivin, O.P., the unwavering force behind this profoundly humanizing publication: your commitment to capturing the true voices of Siena's learners is inspirational. We are all so grateful.

Caitlyn Pisarski
Executive Director,
Siena Literacy Center

I Am a Dreamer

Kiarra Lewis



I am Kiarra Lewis, and I am a dreamer. Before I came to Siena there were so many things I had hoped to do with my life but could not because I could barely read. And because reading was so difficult for me, I felt like an outsider and sometimes got into trouble.

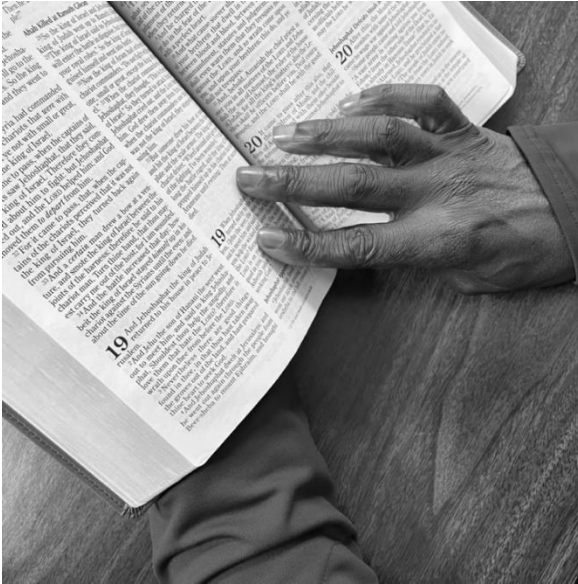
So I came to Siena.

There I learned my vowels and how to break my words down into syllables. My reading has improved so much that I am now an honor student at Siena. It has changed my life. Now when I dream, I can dream bigger and better. And if I can dream it, I can do it, because I know now that I can do anything. I never thought that I could live on my own – I can. I want to travel, I want marriage and children, and I want to graduate from cosmetology school – I will. And I never thought that I would read simply for pleasure – I do.

As my reading improves, the world continues to open up to me. It is now full of such joy and promise for this dreamer.

Keep the Dream

J.W.



Before I came to the Siena Literacy Center, it was like my life wasn't complete. I always knew I wanted to be able to read. There were times that I would be ashamed that I was around people that could. I always had this nervous feeling that I would be asked to read. I made excuses.

I went to many schools before I came to the Literacy Center. I got no help. I was determined to keep on going. I felt that this was the right place for me even though I faced many challenges here. Something in my spirit would not let me quit. I kept coming.

I don't remember the date that I enrolled here but I do know that it is 2023 and that I am continuing to study. I do know one day that I will be able to do my dream, and that is teaching Sunday school, teaching Bible study, and preaching. Preaching is my calling, and that's what I am going to continue to do. I have come a long way, and quitting is not the answer.

I am very thankful for how far I have come. I thank God and my teacher, Sister Lenore. That is my story! My favorite scripture is Isaiah 41:10.

God said: "Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed for I am your God. I will strengthen you. I will help you. I will uphold you with my righteous right hand" (Is 41:10).

My Journey Through Education

Mariama Harris



America changed my life! When I first came, communication was very hard for me. I did not know how to read or write. My family told me about Siena. When I started at Siena, I started with the alphabet. Everybody helped me. They were good teachers. I improved reading, writing, and understanding. Siena classes helped me to go to school to get a job as a nursing assistant. I passed the class. I also took another class in phlebotomy, and I passed that one. Siena also helped me improve myself

in my job by reading and writing statements. I was taking classes every month to keep up with the job. Siena is helping with all of this. Siena is a very good place to learn and improve yourself. I am still learning and I want to get my GED and go to college.

I am married with three children. I work very hard to care for my children and family while trying to learn. The school is what got me where I am now with the kids and work. It is tough, but I am not going to give up coming to Siena until I reach my goals. I am blessed from all these people who have helped me. They are very good! I pray to God that all Americans and Siena are blessed!

On the Outside Looking In

Jermaine Minor



I see other families enjoying themselves. They seem to have no cares and no worries about money, jobs, or what the future holds for them and their children. I want that for me and my children. I dream of being financially stable, a good provider for my family. Being poor is embarrassing. I want to live life without

struggling. But my low reading skills have always kept me on the outside looking in: not being able to read hurts.

I am often ashamed and try to avoid situations that require reading skills. Applying for jobs is particularly painful. I have sometimes been made fun of because I have difficulty reading. But being illiterate is no joke – it stops you in your tracks.

Siena Literacy gives me hope. I believe if I can put my mind to it, I can learn to read. That is why I continue to come. I am not where I want to be yet, but my reading has improved. I just read my first book from cover to cover. I will not quit. I am a work in progress.

No Shame

Marion Carter



Education begins at home. I went to public school and fell through the cracks. There was no one there to see why I wasn't learning. I got tired of being laughed at for learning by the fast learners who made fun of slow learners. If I didn't have any family to help me in everyday life, reading my mail and my statements would be very difficult. I couldn't let anyone see my bank

statements or anything personal. It's just my niece and my two sisters that I could trust. If there was an emergency alert I wouldn't know what was happening!

However, I could drive all the way to Atlanta, Georgia, and get there safely and back again!

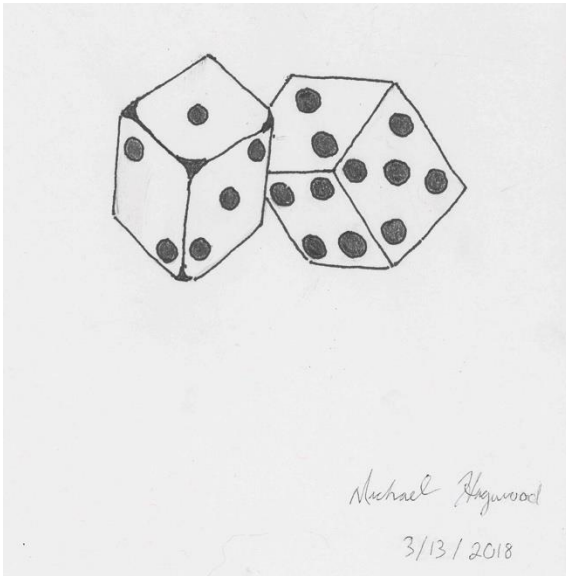
Coming here is the best thing that has happened to me! I come here four days a week and one of those days I see my tutor. But sometimes I have three or four tutors! I don't have to hide that I couldn't read. I was ashamed of it, and now I am not ashamed.

I appreciate the staff at Siena. I saw they were interested in me. When I came here, it was like they opened up my brain and took the cobwebs out and put knowledge in my head.

I feel comfortable here because everyone is learning – even more people like me! You are never too old to learn! I can read my mail and do my paperwork – like renew my lease. I can fill out most of it now! I helped my step-son learn things like “cat” and “rat” at school! I am feeling good because of what I have accomplished. I will be holding my head high now! Ain’t no more shame in my name!

Inspiration from a Young Man

Michael Hagwood



When I first came here I was mad all the time because my reading level was so low. I felt my world was upside down. Because my reading levels were low, it was hard to really make my goals into a reality. When I came to Siena my anger started to go away because my

reading was getting better. Then I became happier and happier. I started to open up some doors. I was a line leader/trainer in a factory. I could have had a lot of jobs. With my reading level being down, it taught me to never stick to what I know – if you stay in your comfort zone, you will never achieve anything.

I love a challenge. I love when something is difficult because the challenge shows me what I am made of. I never allow a challenge to defeat me. I went to MIAT and I was proud because of how my reading was performing in a classroom.

I am in a school for welding right now, and in my free time I draw roses for tattoos. I am reading books about home improvement and landscaping and blueprints. I feel like reading is a good educational tool because you learn things. I like reading a dictionary. I learn new words and write poems.

The Humble Prince

Michael Hagwood

Once there was a young man that was so tall
and in his mind his dream will never fall.
He goes to school and works very hard
from nine to two he is a star!
He's a lion for success
He never takes no mess.
He writes poetry and draws
He never takes no rest.
He keeps calm drawing
and stays in his mind.
He hangs with the right people
and is never doing time.
So if you know how to read
and if you know how to shout;
if you listen to the story clear,
You'll know what I am talking about!

I Never Quit Trying

Arthur Cogshell

As a young boy I started working on the farm when I was 9 or 10 years old. We did not own the farm. There were 12 kids. I was the third oldest. I had to drop out of school at 9 years old because our Daddy left us. So I had to work out in the field to chop and pick cotton and drive a tractor. I could do anything on the farm that needed to be done. Our family then went up to the city of Little Rock, and I worked in a car wash. Then I found work at a bakery. From there I started a job at a sawmill cutting wood. My pay was 75 cents an hour. I was never out of a job!

Once I walked into a place and the owner told me about a machine I would have to use. He said he would have someone teach me. I told him, "I can run that machine", and I walked over and showed him what I could do. He was amazed, and I got the job!

I came to Michigan on a Saturday on a Greyhound Bus and got a job on a Thursday at General Motors earning \$3.50 an hour. The supervisor said that it takes three-to-four weeks to learn the job. I learned it in two days!

Before I came to Siena Literacy Center I went to places in hopes to learn to read, but I always felt left out. They would give you literature, but all you could do was lay it down. So I went to the library on Six Mile Road, and the person there told me to go to the Siena Literacy Center and to ask for someone older who could teach me to read and write.

Not only did I come, but I brought four more people to the Center. What I liked when I first came was the staff. Everything I couldn't learn when I was young, I have learned here. I have a better chance to pick up things. My tutor is patient with me. She taught me to break down words into syllables, and I learned my vowels in one day. Now I am reading signs on billboards and can do things on the computer.

I am thankful for what I got here. I am a peaceable man, only looking for good! How you live can bring good things on you. I bypassed a lot with God's help and common sense.

This Is My Journey

Shirley Morrow



I came to Siena because I was interested in improving my reading and writing. The tutor that I was assigned worked with me for two years to help me improve toward that goal. I wrote

daily in my journal, and this writing helped me express some of my feelings so I could go back and reflect on them. I could also address my weaknesses without being fearful or ashamed.

Some of the things I learned about myself also encouraged me to accept some of these weaknesses. I was able to improve in self-acceptance. I was no longer ashamed of what I didn't know because I was able to obtain tools to improve myself. I began to read more, go out more, and see more, and my vocabulary increased. I became more adventurous. I no longer had the fear of stepping out of my comfort zone. This opened new doors. I went to a couple of operas by myself and several plays at the Repertory Theater. I went to the museum of art. I could do all of these things because I could look at myself differently. I now have the tools to improve myself in many areas of life.

I was able to learn how to use a computer here by attending classes with Abdual. I met a lot of nice students. The staff here is very encouraging and supportive. With the tools and the support that you all gave me, I was encouraged to continue to learn. The tools are mine now, so there is no stopping me!

My goal is to attend junior college because I want to complete a writing class successfully to improve my writing skills. I want to write my life story to pass on to my grandchildren. This is important for me so they would know something about who I was and our family history.

It's not where you started but where you end. So I thank you, Siena Literacy Center.

Coming to America

B.K.



I am from Gambia. My date of birth was 11-10-67. I was born in a village named Katava. My father's name is Bakary. My mother's name is Binta. They were born in Gambia. They are all farmers. My father needed me to work the farm.

In 1988 I traveled to the United States. I arrived December 28, 1988, in New York City at JFK airport.

When I first came, I was working in a store with no documentation. I did that for a few years. From there I

came to be a street vendor of different merchandise. Now I also drive for "Lyft," a limo-type of transportation. People give me the highest five-star marks. I can say I am a good driver! And now I started to do vending again.

In 2000, I moved to Detroit and got married the same year. I have three beautiful girls, and I love them to death! The eldest graduated from Alma College in 2022.

I started to come to Siena Literacy Center on March 18, 2008. They helped me a lot! I increased my reading and speaking. The thing that is the hardest for me is my writing. It is a challenge! When I close the book, it is hard to write the words. So my goal is to write by myself.

I am grateful to be a student at Siena Literacy Center! I thank all the staff working at the Center. They are doing a good job helping people like me every day. I want to thank all of my tutors. Right now I am working with Valerie Wade.

A New Life

D.D.



I grew up on a farm in Africa with three brothers and two sisters. I did not go to school. My

father is still living. I talk with my mom on the phone. I live in Oak Park, Michigan, with my uncle. I work in a salon and do braiding. At the salon I talk to customers. I greet people.

I started at Siena in June 2021. I was given the National Honor Society award for adult literacy. I call my tutor, Sister Rosemarie, on my phone. I come to school two times a week. I like talking in English, and I like reading it with my tutor. I am working on numbers and dollars and cents. I need to speak English to get a different job and to get my citizenship. I want to work in a restaurant and cook or to work in a women's store. I like clothes. I like to dress well. I like to shop and go to the Muslim mosque. I speak Wolof. At the mosque they speak English and French.

I come to school two times a week for class. Abdual helps me learn on the computer and Sister Rosemarie helps me with speaking and writing. I wish others could come. I talk to a new bride and tell her to come to Siena. Siena is helping me!

My Life

J.K.

I was born and raised in Jamaica. When I was 20, I left Jamaica with my oldest sister. We moved to Pontiac, Michigan, where my sister had a job. I left Pontiac because of transportation problems and moved to Detroit to live with my second-oldest sister. It was much easier to get a bus. I worked cleaning houses and at Wonder Bread.

One of my sons was enrolled in a private school. One day my daughter and I went to pick him up. While waiting, we discovered Siena Literacy Center in one wing of the school. My daughter signed me up after she found out about their reading program. After being away from Siena, I have now returned. I want to get my Certified Nursing Assistant degree. I believe by continuing to improve my reading skills, I will be able to get my CNA degree.

I have two sons, one daughter and 10 grandchildren. I've also raised two of the grandchildren who are now 15 and 18. I've been a foster parent to 12 children and a caregiver for the elderly for many years and continue to do so.

Never Give Up on Your Dreams

Juliana



I am a native of Cameroon. I came to America in 2007 to find a better life for my family.

I did training to work with patients. I love

taking care of people. I earned my CNA certificate. I had a little bit of a challenge in reading and writing. I wasn't good at that. I decided to come to Siena. I had good help here. They support me in learning how to read and write. From there I got my GED and kept studying to have a career in nursing. Without the help of Siena, I would never have the chance to do what I want to do in life.

Right now I am studying in community college, taking classes towards a nursing program. It is a lot of work! I have to persevere and press forward! I would like to work in a hospital or a nursing home. I would be grateful if I would see my dreams come true.

Without the help of my tutor, I don't think I could do it. He helps you and encourages you and sacrifices all of his time without grumbling. He has the patience to show me three or four times before I understand. He never gets grumpy. He keeps encouraging me. When I get that diploma I will be grateful and thankful to God and all the people who have helped me succeed in life.

My Struggle

Linda



Before I came to the Siena Literacy Center, I was very uncomfortable going out into the community with no education. I couldn't read a TV Guide or a newspaper. There

were things that came into the house like important mail; but when you can't read, you can't look forward to a future. It prevented me from letting people into my space.

But since I attended Siena Literacy, I am so proud to say that I can read a magazine, and I can read the mail that comes into my house without going out of my comfort zone. So I am very happy that I am furthering my education. Things look so promising for my future.

I have been going to Siena Literacy Center for several years, and working on the computer has been a big help in my reading process. I am proud to say that my reading level is up quite a bit from when I started. I am so proud of myself! I have received my CPR certification, and my certification in Medication Administration. Over the years I always thought something was wrong with me. Now I know it would just take one person to have some compassion for me and help me along the way. I found that person in my tutor, Jan.

My Journey to Success with Siena

P.R.



When I came to Siena, I was scared to admit that my reading and math skills were not where they needed to be to be successful in life. I prayed to God and He directed me here. When I came, Sister Betty greeted me at the door and my fears went away. She asked me what I was seeking and made me feel

comfortable. I told her, “I want to improve my math and reading skills.”

I went to enroll in the office, and that’s where my journey began at Siena. I started off with reading. I had numerous tutors: Miss Fry and Miss Audrey. Both tutors made me feel comfortable. We worked one-on-one and they gave me what I needed to enhance my reading ability and life skills. For example we worked on pronunciation, word attack skills, and parts of speech.

My reading skills improved a lot to help me help my grandson, so he could feel better about himself and get his high school diploma too. It enhanced my communication skills with people and with my family. I was brought out of my shell and now I LOVE reading! I can pick up a book and read a newspaper, I can read signs, and I know the meaning of the words. I can enjoy life better, and I know how to express myself more in words.

Life is much better for me, and I enjoy my journey with reading and math. My tutor made me more comfortable and more sure of myself, and I no longer have to feel bad about myself.

If anybody wants to learn to read, the tutors that Siena assigns to you will help you to have the freedom and the power to learn. They motivate you to want to help yourself. They taught me a better way to think about reading, to enjoy it more. I have a love of math now. Mr. Ken, Mr. Mike, and Ms. Nancy helped me change hate to love of math.

So now I am excited and more comfortable because:

1. I want to help my grandson with communication skills and the basic skills to read a sign and to go to the supermarket.
2. Reading is vital!
3. I am getting ready to go to a community college in September.
4. Siena is geared to adults. It is free! It is a blessing!
5. Siena leaves a legacy on those most in need!

My Son and I Are Learners

C.N.



My Name is C.N. I come from Senegal, West Africa. Before I came to the United States, I worked 20 years in the Dakar airport in my country.

I studied English grammar and vocabulary in Senegal from middle school to college, and I did very well in those subjects. But my difficulty is speaking.

Now I am here with my son. He is 6 years old. I first came on vacation, and now my son wants

to stay, learn, and speak English like the other children. It is a difficult decision between my parents in Senegal and my job here. Finally I think it is better for my son's future and his needs. It is my son's life. I see that it is better if my son stays here to further his education and for his future.

Being comfortable in speaking English and in our travels through life, the two of us would be experiencing it together, and we could help one another. He will be learning things in school, and I will be doing the same here.

I'm at the Siena Center to perfect my English and to help me for different situations. It helps me to do everyday things and for a future job and to get my citizenship one day. Since I came to Siena, my life has changed. Now I go to doctors' and other appointments. Before I came I was scared to talk to someone. Now it is easy. It is getting better.

My Journey So Far

Fatoumata Toure



I am Fatoumata Toure. I come from the Ivory Coast of Africa. The city where I came from was the first capital. They changed the name to Abidjan. I was born into a family with five children: three brothers, two sisters, and me – and my mom and dad.

Africa is very hot. It is very hard to get jobs because there are not enough jobs for everybody. I went to school to learn. I studied

for three years, but then I stopped to help my mom. We sold tomatoes and hot peppers from 8am to 11pm. I also bought food for my mom. After we cooked, I had to do the dishes, sweep the house, fix the beds, and give a shower to my sister. Then I was free to play. I wanted to go to school, but my parents did not have money for tuition. My mom was trying to get help from our family so I could go to school, but nobody could help us.

In 1993, I was 18 when I came to the United States. I didn't speak English. I met my stepson when he was 3. I taught my son to speak my language, and he understood everything in two months. I didn't go to school in New York because I could not read English. I learned to be a hairdresser – braiding hair every day. Then I had my daughter and had no chance to get to school. I was in New York for six years.

In 1999, I came to Detroit and did hair-braiding. I had three children – but God always helps! I found a person to help my children. They were 9 and 5, and she helped them with their homework. My 5-year-old daughter is really smart. She did her homework by herself.

In 2005, I found Siena Literacy Center. My first tutor passed away. Then my second tutor had her own school. In 2020, I wanted to work on my citizenship, but the corona virus came along. I tried for my driver's license but I got one question wrong – I spelled street "STRET". Just one wrong and they would not give me a license.

Now I have Derek to help me study for the citizenship exam, and I passed it on 9/28/22. As of 10/17/22, I am a U.S. citizen. I look forward to voting!

Siena Literacy Center is fair to me! I thank you Siena! I thank Derek!
Anything can happen!

Journey to Freedom

Angela Wilson



When I heard about Siena Literacy Center, it was from a friend named Pat. She told me to come and see for myself. I came and they finally called to set up classes for me. When I came I was so happy to see that the people were encouraging me to come to further my education. It made me want to come to school and put everything I could into learning on the computer and learning to read a little better.

The journey has made me happy. I am focused. I am at peace with myself. I see things more clearly. I feel better about myself because I didn't give up. I'm hoping that one day I can get a diploma or a GED – and say I did it for myself. If I can do it, anyone can do it! Mr. Mike, a staff member told me, "Don't ever give up on yourself! Just put your mind to it and you will get it!" The computer was challenging. I was going to give up. He said, "No, keep on trying!" And I did! So now I'm reading on the computer. I'm doing things I never thought I could do thanks to Mr. Mike and the staff at Siena Literacy Center. It took a long time for me to get here. My family is very proud of me for trying to further my education.

As of today, I feel my time is for helping people by serving them – cleaning, cooking, driving, and just being a listening ear to make someone’s day.

To show you how I have grown, several years ago I went to Lansing and talked to the legislators about being part of Siena to get that education. They listened to me! They understood that Siena Literacy Center was important! They agreed to everything I talked about, and they applauded this school with a standing ovation. They agreed that this school was the best thing for me and other students of the Siena Literacy Center. So that’s why we are still here today!

Valiant

Sister Lenore Boivin, O.P.

Valiant are they who keep trying

in this there is no denying.

Tireless they hold the goal

forever and ever in their soul.

Searching endlessly for their worth

to give them new worlds to birth.

Hope is the beam that lights the way

and levels the chance for a better day!

About Siena Literacy Center



Siena Literacy Center is located in Detroit, Michigan, and provides effective education programs for adults seeking to improve their ability to successfully meet the challenges of

everyday living by learning foundational skills in reading, writing, and math, and/or English as a Second Language in keeping with the Dominican commitment to education.

Siena Literacy Center was founded by the Adrian Dominican Sisters, who saw a need for a foundational educational program for students from all walks of life. The ministry was taken on by Sister Mary Hemmen, who in October of 1995 opened the doors of Siena Literacy Center to 20 students and 12 tutors. The program was originally located at Bishop Borgess High School, where it operated for 10 years and served hundreds of adults in reading, math, and English language skills.

In 2005, Siena moved to New Genesis Baptist Church, housed in Detroit's former Yost Elementary School at 16161 Winston. It remained there for five years before moving in May of 2010 to its present location, a former convent at 16888 Trinity on the campus of Christ the King Church.

Sister Mary Hemmen passed away on January 25, 2018, after a long career in educational endeavors. A teacher, an administrator, and a religious educator, her ministry and service continue to be remembered and valued, and Siena Literacy Center continues to change people's lives in the richest and most rewarding ways.

Siena Literacy Center is dedicated to honoring and encouraging diversity, equity, and inclusivity among our staff, board, volunteers, and those we serve. By doing so, we build strength, discover creativity, and determine purpose. It is in challenging the status quo that we build a better and more holistic workforce ecosystem and community.

To learn more, visit www.sienaliteracy.org.