

In 30 years... A brief history of READ Saskatoon

by Pat Stuart

Once upon a time in 1976 the Government of Canada withdrew active support for Adult Basic Education programs. In Saskatoon a steering committee was created to examine possible solutions to "illiteracy". By the end of 1978, READ Saskatoon formally adopted its name and established its objectives and the one-to-one tutoring program. In April 1982, a learner representative was added to READ Saskatoon's board of directors to help address some of the issues that adult literacy learners faced.

For the first five years of its existence, READ Saskatoon survived on funding from community college grants. In 1982, the projected budget was \$2,593. READ Saskatoon's board began to plan for the future and hired the first Tutor-Learner Coordinator in 1984.

In 1986, the Tutor-Learner Coordinator's working hours were increased to 25 hours per week. The job description included managing phone calls, meeting prospective learners, checking in with learners and tutors to assess their progress, keeping records, representing READ Saskatoon at meetings in the community and suggesting representatives for the READ Saskatoon board of directors.

That same year, changes in provincial policy meant that the Saskatoon Regional Community College (now SIAST) could no longer contract READ Saskatoon's tutoring services for adult learners. READ Saskatoon needed to diversify its funding base. In 1987, the agency received its first grant: \$500 from Labatt's Brewery.

By 1988, when the Government of Canada created the National Literacy Secretariat, READ Saskatoon's programming had begun to broaden. For two years we delivered programming at the Regional Psychiatric Centre. We began to see the



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benefits of an inner-city adult classroom at the Friendship Inn.

In 1992, the Government of Saskatchewan announced a review of all program funding. READ Saskatoon's budget was reduced by fifteen percent. The immediate result of this budget cut was to reduce staff to eighty percent of full-time for ten months of the year.

READ Saskatoon's first recorded "Strategic Planning Day" was held in January 1992. Board minutes from that meeting mention Family Literacy for the first time in its history.

By 1992, READ Saskatoon was responsible for a wide range of projects and programs. One included an Aboriginal book project, *Grandmothers Project*, with the Older Native Women's Health Project. Unfortunately, inaccurate translation of the stories into syllabics meant that READ Saskatoon engaged in a lengthy legal challenge to recoup translator costs and to reprint an accurately translated book.

In 1992, READ Saskatoon and Saskatoon Public Library created a Cooperative Agreement. The READ board of directors could no longer manage the daily

operations of READ Saskatoon and named Sylvia Vicq Administrative Director.

A community literacy needs assessment survey was completed in 1994. As a result, READ Saskatoon initiated outreach programs to inner-city agencies and provided reading circles and tutoring at the GRAS Centre. By May 1995, programming at the Friendship Inn and Family Support Centre began to wind down. The relationship with the Friendship Inn terminated in early 1996.

Up to that point the Administrative Director had worked out of a home office. With her impending retirement, READ began a search for office space. We secured our first official home in the Avenue Building in downtown Saskatoon.

In 1998, READ sponsored the first Read 'n' Feed fundraiser at Amigo's Cantina. This annual event has proven successful in attracting new donors for READ Saskatoon. We established a contingency fund in 1999, and the board of directors also adopted a code for ethical and financial accountability.

In 2004, READ Saskatoon's adult classroom program at the GRAS Centre came to an end. The program had, over time, transformed into an employability program. READ Saskatoon withdrew, knowing that the GRAS Centre/Saskatoon Food Bank and Learning Centre would ensure the longevity of learning opportunities for adults in Saskatoon's inner city.

In 2004, READ evaluated its volunteer programs to examine why there was a decline in volunteer numbers. We used the results of this project to develop new ways of responding to literacy. The same year we created annual learner and tutor awards. The Rigby-Wilcox Award recognizes the commitment of a READ Saskatoon learner to improving their literacy skills and knowledge, while the Sylvia Vicq Award recognizes the commitment of a tutor to their learner and to READ Saskatoon.

READ Saskatoon's Board continued to evaluate their effectiveness and in 2005 revised our bylaws. In September 2005, the Government of Saskatchewan announced the creation of a Literacy Commission to raise awareness of the importance of high-level literacy for all citizens of the province.

In 2006, READ Saskatoon fine-tuned its vision and mission. That same year, 18 million dollars were cut from literacy programs across Canada by the federal government.

In 2007, READ Saskatoon hosted its first PGI invitational golf tournament. We raised \$20,000 the first year. Today, READ Saskatoon continues to be

optimistic about the future. The organization's literacy programs and partnerships continue to diversify and flourish. The four full-time staff at READ work with over 2,000 individuals every year, including:

- 175 adult learners
- 190 volunteers
- 1800 children
- 200 staff from schools, preschools, daycares, business and Community Based Organizations
- 17 different funding sources (federal, provincial and municipal governments, philanthropists, foundations, businesses). ■

Quotes from the READ files:

"Literacy is important because it makes you feel included."

— Yanling Li

"I want to read to my little guy."

— Stewart St. Angby

"I have a very supportive family. They are proud of me."

— Kathy Aguilera

"READ Saskatoon is the best part of my life."

— Dorothy Headon

"If you can't learn from others you can't teach others."

— Jon Paul-Suwala

"READ Saskatoon creates access for people."

— Leslie Gosselin, SaskEnergy

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