



Tuesday, May 31st, 2011

To Whom It May Concern:

It is my pleasure to write this letter of recommendation for the Literature for Life program. I am writing today on behalf of Women Moving Forward, a program of the Jane/Finch Community and Family Centre. Women Moving Forward (WMF) is a program for young, sole-support mothers in the greater Jane and Finch community who are committed to moving their families from poverty to prosperity. WMF works from the belief that in order to achieve this, women must pursue some form of post-secondary training or education in order to secure a sustainable career.

Many of our participants, due to early pregnancy, an alienating school curriculum or other personal challenges, did not graduate from secondary school. As a result, Literature for Life (L4L) has been an integral part of WMF since 2005 through our literacy component. The work that L4L facilitators do with our participants is essential to their success not only in post-secondary school, but in each and every step leading to college or university, including: upgrading or completing their Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD); volunteering in their chosen career field; applying for and working at a part-time job to finance their education; and applying to college, university and student assistance programs. Through both the Women with Wordz reading circle and the English Language Arts (ELA) program (which focuses on the basics of written communication), L4L facilitators successfully engage women for whom reading and writing is often an intimidating and anxiety producing process.

L4L understands the history young mothers have with the education system, and has formatted their Women with Wordz program to reintroduce women to reading. Through choosing novels that participants can relate to, L4L facilitators present reading in a completely new context. As one participant shared, "Jo (Altilia) got me reading again. I usually don't read novels, but I'm really enjoying it." Not only are women reading, however, they are learning how to read critically. Through the discussions about characters, plot and style, participants gain confidence in their ability to understand and analyze literature. Because of this process, women are also strengthening their sense of self. Through the characters, they are studying, and through the opportunity to write poetry and creative prose, women begin to heal from their pasts and discover who they are today. As a result of the Women with Wordz reading circle, women who were once afraid to read aloud for fear of making mistakes or of being ridiculed are now reading not only assigned novels aloud, but are also sharing their own poetry.

Starting with the basics of grammar, the ELA program reteaches women how to write. Focusing on good sentence structure, how to write a strong paragraph and how to clearly build a thesis statement, women become excited about spelling tests so they can improve their vocabulary, and enjoy the challenge of writing their first five-paragraph essay. Through understanding the different barriers each woman

comes with, and working with her to overcome them, L4L facilitators take the fear out of writing and women are able to develop not only their own writing style, but also a belief in their ability to achieve. By the end of the program, L4L facilitators have guided women to a place where they are ready to reengage with the public education, either to complete their OSSD or to start post-secondary studies.

Each L4L facilitator we have worked with comes to the program with a belief that each woman is both capable and deserving of education. Our participants feel this, and thrive under the unwavering support offered. The impact of the work L4L has on the lives of our participants continues long after they have graduated from WMF. One woman, who recently completed the York University Women's Studies Bridging Program, came back to share her final essay with WMF staff. She received a B+ on her essay, but was even prouder of the professor's comments, which spoke of her ability to weave her thoughts and argument seamlessly throughout her essay. The woman asked that I pass the comments on to Jo, because, as she stated, "without [L4L], I wouldn't be where I am today. [They] made me believe that I could do it, and showed me how." This sentiment is one that all of our graduates share.

The most profound outcome of the L4L program, however, is the impact that L4L's work has on the families of our participants. As women become more confident in their ability to read, they begin to share this with their children. Women who had never been to the library with their families before L4L are now going regularly, and have started a routine of reading with their children. As the mothers in our program return to school, they become even stronger role models for their children. They are able to help with homework, and many share that they now sit at the kitchen table with their children, doing homework side-by-side. As a result, their children are also beginning to see a different future. As one woman shared, her nine-year-old daughter is now planning to go to university like her mother, "and she won't accept any grade lower than a B+".

Literature for Life is a truly unique program that works not only to help young mothers begin to read and write, but to believe that their families deserve a bright future. I look forward to continuing to work Jo Altilia and her team as they lead an inspirational program that enriches the lives of so many young families.

Sincerely,

Heather Miller
Team Lead, Women Moving Forward