

StoryCorps Interview at Rancho Cucamonga Public Library

Jerry Piazza and Allen Callaci

AC: Jerry, how many people in your immediate life knew about your illiteracy?

JP: Well, I actually kept it quiet from just about everyone, even family members. You become an expert on deception. You are ashamed and embarrassed to let people know that you are a functional illiterate. You spend your adult life trying to hide the fact that you're a functional illiterate. That is the number one reason adults will not get the help they need because of that stigma—being looked at as being stupid or dumb.

AC: And you've now have become a fairly public face, right, for adult learners in general, at least in the local community, right?

JP: Yes, over the years, through public speaking and interviews, I guess a few people have learned who I am. Rosie asked me one time if I would do an interview for a local newspaper...

AC: And that was Rosie Manela, who was the woman who kind of instituted the program here at the Rancho Cucamonga Public Library.

JP: And I told her I would, but I started having second thoughts because I was about to tell the world something that I was hiding all my life. But the more I thought about it, I realized that that's the one thing that has been holding me back from getting the help I needed. When you come to a program, you get to meet other people who are in the same condition you are and you find out that you're not alone. And when you start to learn to read and spell like you should, that is a completely life-changing experience. And it's a very comforting feeling to know you can start handling situations you never could before. A simple thing like reading a sign, a street sign while I'm driving, filling out a form, reading a newspaper—things that most people take for granted that we could never take for granted.

AC: How has the library changed your life?

JP: Before I came to the literacy program, I had never read a book in my life. And I'll never forget my first book was "Tom Sawyer." It will stick in my mind for I guess the rest of my life. It did open up a whole new world for me too, and right to this date I think I've read about 53 books, all from cover to cover. You become proud of what you're doing and the steps you're taking. Don't let what people think about you hold you back from getting the help you need, because otherwise you'll never get the help you need.