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Mother's literacy struggles inspire her to help others



[Gabor Degre](#) | BDN

Ginny Gifford with her eight-year-old twin sons Jadon (left) and Jesse Gifford at the Bangor Public Library on Tuesday. [Buy Photo](#)

By [Eric Russell](#), BDN Staff

Posted Jan. 27, 2011, at 10:02 p.m.

Editor's Note: *Over the next several months, the Bangor Daily News will highlight a local [Pay it Forward movement](#) with stories of ordinary people benefiting from acts of kindness and how they chose to pay that kindness forward.*

The first book Ginny Gifford remembers reading in the house where she grew up was the "Happy Hollisters," a series published in the 1950s and '60s about a family that solves mysteries.

She was in third grade. The book wasn't even hers. A classmate let her borrow it.

"We just didn't read in my house," Gifford, now 43, recalled. "We never went to the library. It wasn't encouraged,"

An already tumultuous childhood turned tragic when Gifford was 12. Her mom was diagnosed with [cancer](#) and died nine months later, forcing Gifford to enter foster care. Amid

the instability of her home life, Gifford continued to read borrowed tomes whenever she could. “The Bobbsey Twins.” “Nancy Drew.”

She eventually graduated from Lee Academy and later earned a two-year [nursing](#) degree from Northern Maine Technical College, never fully realizing that her reading skills were stunted during her childhood.

“I struggled. I almost didn’t make it,” she said of college.

Fast-forward two decades and Gifford is married with twin 8-year-old boys, Jesse and Jadon, and living in Old Town. She has spent the last 20 years working as a nurse, although she admits she often has had difficulty reading hospital memos and doctors’ orders.

Her husband, Dennis, is not much of a reader either. Gifford often worried that the family she was building too closely resembled her own as a child. She needed to break the cycle.

“My husband and I both wanted a way to create for our children what we didn’t have,” Gifford said.

The mother did something that she had avoided most of her adult life. She asked for help.

At a community festival in Old Town a couple of years ago, Gifford came across a booth occupied by representatives of an adult education literacy program in town.

She saw a chance.

Gifford signed up for the program. She began taking her family to literacy events. They went to the library regularly. They brought books into the home. They read together.

“I always loved to read, but I learned that I had trouble understanding and retaining what I read,” Gifford said. “I always had a deficiency but didn’t really know it.”

Gifford eventually was led to Literacy Volunteers of [Bangor](#), a nonprofit organization that pairs students with volunteer tutors.

“Most people that come to us are spurred by a crisis. Sometimes it’s a divorce or a job loss,” Executive Director Mary Marin Lyon said. “Ginny came for her kids.”

Gifford loves to read. She always has. But the more time she spent with Literacy Volunteers, the more she learned about herself.

“It was bigger than just ‘Can I read?’” she said. “It affects every aspect of your life: what you think about yourself, your self-esteem.”

Many adults have a hard time admitting that they struggle to read, but Gifford said for her the benefits have outweighed that initial feeling of embarrassment.

Around the same time Gifford joined Literacy Volunteers, Lyon met with a man named Rick Bernstein about the concept of Pay it Forward. Bernstein and his wife were slowly building a network of civic leaders and nonprofit agencies that were willing to buy into the idea of Pay it Forward, which challenges recipients of good deeds to do something for someone else.

Lyon said Pay it Forward and Literacy Volunteers were a perfect match. Since tutors offer their services without payment, students often feel a sense of indebtedness, she said. Pay it Forward breaks down that feeling.

Now, on the intake form for Literacy Volunteers, which outlines an agreement between students and tutors, is an item that encourages students to find a way to pay the generosity forward to someone else in need.

Gifford, who already had paid that kindness forward by altering the culture of her home to benefit her sons, found another way. She joined the Literacy Volunteers board of directors.

Charles Veeder, the board's president, said Gifford's value has been inestimable.

"She brings a background to the board that nobody else has," he said. "She can throw a different light on things that some of us have never thought of. That voice has been missing. She's not afraid to express her opinion or go against the majority if she believes in something."

On Pay it Forward, Veeder said the board has embraced the concept, but it's students like Gifford who carry it out.

"Ginny is perfect for [Pay it Forward] because she is constantly looking for people to help," he said. "She's working amid that population that we're trying to reach. We need a dozen Ginnys."

As one of the public faces of Literacy Volunteers, Gifford still struggles a little with the attention.

"I don't think my story is any more compelling than anyone else's," she said.

But every time she shares her story with others or challenges conventional wisdom at a board meeting or takes her boys to the library, she remembers the kindness that was shown to her.

And she keeps telling her story.

More information about Literacy Volunteers of Bangor is available online at www.lvbangor.org or by calling 947-8451.