

# DONNA'S STORY

DONNA WOODARD is The 2004 Canada Post  
“Individual Achievement” Award Winner for Quebec

My name is Donna and I live in a small Quebec town called Mansonville. I will turn 27 on May 23 this year, and until 2002 I could hardly read or write.

Life was very difficult for me. To tell you the truth, I was scared to go out of the house anywhere and too shy to talk to people. It is hard to go somewhere when you can't read well, because there are things you have to read nearly everywhere. I couldn't do it.

One of the worst parts was pretending to be able to read and know things when I couldn't. I didn't want people to know because I was afraid they would make fun of me, and say hurtful things.

In school I tried to learn, but it just didn't work. Although some of my teachers were helpful, and I did learn a little bit, it was not enough. I began to feel scared, frustrated, disappointed and afraid to tell anyone. Only my parents knew—English was my Mom's third language--my Dad helped me a lot at home, but it was still not enough to be able to read like the others. I lost confidence in myself and I stayed at home a lot. I was teased a lot by people around me, so I just gave up for a while.

I missed a lot of school and I wanted to quit, but my Dad told me not to--I really wanted to quit, but I didn't. I could only get jobs that did not involve any reading, like shovelling snow, raking leaves, and cleaning. I couldn't fill in an application form for a better job. I never went shopping or to the bank by myself—my parents had to help me figure out things. People thought I was stupid, and I was beginning to think so myself.

When I was 16, I joined the “16+ Program” at Massey-Vanier High School and took a vocational course in maintenance. I did two “stages” in maintenance at two different companies, and got my certificate. I guess there was not much reading and writing involved, because when I left there I still could hardly read or write, and I was still scared and frustrated!

My big turn-around started in the summer of 2001. I joined a program called Youth Job Strategy, and I was part of a group of young, unemployed people (16-25). We called ourselves the Magnificent Seven! We did community work, learned about gardening, organized a film festival (NFB), learned basic computer skills at the community learning centre, put on a spaghetti supper, learned about job-search and wrote our CVs. I did a “stage” at the Reilly House, a local community centre. I marched in the parade at the Multi-Cultural Festival dressed as a fox! It was a fun summer.

One of the things we had to do in this program was set some goals. Mine were to get a job and to improve my reading and writing skills. We had to show that we had done something towards these goals before the end of the program. My job was shovelling snow at the local plastic factory in the winter. By the end of the summer I had an appointment with the Yamaska Literacy Council who came and tested my levels of reading and writing skills, and in the fall I met my tutor, Jane, and we began to work one-on-one on my reading and writing skills. I didn’t know it then, but I was on my way to a better life.

We started using the Voyager Series (Reading and Writing for Today’s Adults—New Reader Press). These books have interesting stories for young adults with questions, writing and vocabulary exercises, and even some puzzles. We did some writing and composing on the computer, and found some math and reading games on the

internet, too. I also asked if I could practise cursive writing, to improve my handwriting, and now it's much better.

Things began to change. Learning to read was hard—I could read many little words, but I didn't know their meanings. But as soon as we began working it began to get easier, and little by little I began to believe in myself, and trust my tutor. I found I could talk more easily and I was not so shy.

At first I didn't think it would be fun, but Jane explained a lot of things to me, and she never laughed at me—it began to be fun learning to read, and I looked forward to our weekly classes. One of the good things is that there are no exams, no passing or failing—just gradual progress. When I finish one set of books in the series, I get a certificate. I have four certificates now. I am starting on Book 5 in the series this week.

When Jane had an operation and had to stay at home for a while, I rode my bike eight km each way to go to her house. And even in wintertime I walk a couple of km to get to town for my classes—I didn't often have a ride. I told my employer that I could not work on Mondays because that was my reading day.

Jane and I went to Cowansville to visit the Literacy Council and find some books to read, and also went to the Christmas party they put on, where I met some of the other students. We went to see the play, *Oliver Twist*, which was my first time in a live theatre. I have joined the Knowlton Library, so I can have enough books to read, because now I love to read, and as well as doing my reading class each week, I go through quite a pile of reading books just for pleasure. I would rather read than watch TV!

I don't shovel snow any more for a living! I found myself a job in a bakery last summer, and then later moved to the golf club and ski hill so that now I have a year round job working in the kitchen. I don't have to read much, but I could if I needed to. I am

now planning to find another more challenging job. I am also studying to get my driver's licence, so I can have a car, and get around more. This will help my chances of getting a better job.

Lots of things I do now more easily: I can do my own shopping—I just bought myself a new 18-speed bicycle all by myself). I do my own banking. I do my own job search. I enjoy cooking, and have some cook books, and look up others in magazines and on the internet. I do some volunteer work at the Reilly House helping them out with their second hand clothing store. I use the computers at the Learning Centre to write my compositions, make greeting cards, and surf the net. I enjoy doing woodwork, skiing, internet games, and love country music, monster trucks, and tractor pulling. Maybe some day I will work for a trucking company—that is my dream.

My life is easier and much more enjoyable now. People don't laugh any more—they say they are proud of me because they saw the attached story in the newspaper—it is an article by Caroline Kehne in the Sherbrooke Record, Sept. 10, 2003, entitled *Literacy Is Not Just About Reading*, and Jane and I were interviewed for it. So now everyone in my town knows that I couldn't read, ***and that now I can!***

Here is a little poem that I wrote with the help of my first Voyageur book. It was published in the YLC newsletter—Roadways—in March, 2002.

#### LET GO

Let go of sadness  
For if sadness dies  
Life is like a rising sun  
That warms the heart.

Let go of pain  
For when pain dies  
Life is a gentle breeze  
On a hot day.