

A LIFE WITHOUT READING: A NEED TO READ
By: Stanford Bowers

I was born in Jamaica. My mother had 14 children. I was the second oldest and the first son. My father left when I was very young. Ever since I remember, I lived on a farm. It was my aunt and uncle who looked after me because my mother had so many children.

I did not go to school. Even as a small boy, I worked on the farm. I had to behave myself. I was afraid when boys would fight. I did not want to get into trouble. I did not want problems for my family.

My cousins on the farm went to school. I worked six days a week from early morning until dark most days. At night I cleaned buses. My uncle ran four buses. I only got pocket money. I saved some of my money and spent the rest on clothes. Life was just work. I did not have much spare time for fun. On Sunday I always went to church. We had church twice each Sunday for 2-3 hours.

We had no electric lights at first. We had kerosene lamps. Later, we got electricity for cooking and lighting. On the farm we grew corn, red beans, red potatoes, different kinds of yams, plantains and other foods. They had mules and plows to work the farm. What the mules did not do, you did with your back.

I did not learn to read. I didn't want to go to school. No one said school was important. I was not forced to go to school. I just wanted to work. I liked working on the land.

Books did not make sense to me. I don't even remember pictures in books. I could not write my name. I would just put an "X" when I had to write my name. Both my father and mother still cannot read or write. Someone has to read or write for them.

Farms are different today, even in Jamaica. You need to read to have a farm. Reading helps you understand the crops you are growing. Today you need to know what sprays to use to help plants grow. Reading helps because you can read the instructions on the products. You need to read to enjoy life. It opens up a whole new world to you.

I left Jamaica more than 20 years ago. I don't work on a farm now, but I still work hard. I left Jamaica to cut sugar cane in the United States. It was a government contract. The work was hard and dirty. I wanted to see more of the country. Someone else from Jamaica asked if I wanted to pick oranges. I didn't know anyone, so I gave it a try. I picked fruit all season. When the season was over, I couldn't go home.

I needed another job. I had no skills and I couldn't read. It was hard without working papers. I worked for a lawn service. I picked cucumbers in New York State. I came back to Florida and cut more grass. There are not many prospects when you can't read or write. You need to fill out forms, read instructions and follow directions. It is hard to get ahead.

I met my wife when looking for a new place to live. We dated. The day we married, I started work in an orange juice factory. My wife filled out my first job application for me. I stayed at the job for 3 years.

When you can't read, you learn to fake things. You want people to think you can read. Sometimes that is hard. People expect that you can read. In the mid-1980's I knew I needed some education. I got the number of the Literacy Project off the radio. I started to learn to read in Fort Pierce.

Words are everywhere. If you can't read you are dependent on others. I know I had to change. In today's world, education is very important. Sometimes when I pick up the newspaper it isn't a waste of time. I can understand a lot more of what is happening. Words don't come easy for me. Looking back, I can see the change. I understand lots of what I read. It isn't easy, but I am getting there.

At times it might look hard. At times it will be hard. Don't give up. Keep trying. If you give up, your dream stops. It's all worth it in the end.

Don't think about the time it takes at the end of a long working day. Don't think about how long the learning is taking and how hard the words can be. Instead think of accomplishing your dream – being able to read and write. I'm still dreaming of getting my G.E.D. Each word I learn, each sentence I write, brings me closer.

Dedication

My story doesn't just belong to me. It belongs to many people who have helped me to learn. There are lots of them. Kathleen Murphy and the others at the Adult Literacy Project have all given me lots of their time. Everyone at the New Learners Club also needs a special thank you. They help to make reading more exciting. They get us together to have fun and learn new skills. They spend a lot of time to make things happen. Tutors are very special people, too. They give their time to help us to read. They are not paid. Their reward is seeing their students learn to read. Thanks to all of you.

Stanford Bowers was born and raised in Jamaica. He is now a U.S. citizen.