

# literacy

## AND A PASSION TO IMPROVE LIVES

*Dr. Sandra Golden's commitment to lifelong learning has improved her life as well as many others'*

*by Kathy Punches '96, Director of Public Relations and Marketing*

As a graduate student at Cleveland State University, Dr. Sandra Golden volunteered with a local literacy program. She became intrigued and concerned by the fact that there were adults lacking the basic academic skills to be productive citizens in their communities or to be self-sufficient.

"I worked with individuals who were learning English, individuals who had very low reading skills and lacked basic math skills," says Golden, assistant professor of education at Defiance since fall 2007. "That intrigued me so much and it was such a rewarding experience to work with young and older adults - who by the way were very motivated to learn - to watch them progress academically, personally, and socially, and become excited about education. I decided to pursue that interest."

That initial experience led her to a position with the Cleveland Municipal School District in the division of adult and continuing education. There she provided career counseling, basic skills instruction, employability skills and GED test preparation. She coordinated the Cleveland Skills and Career Center which was designed to support adults who lacked basic academic skills or who hoped to obtain a GED or employment.

Golden began to narrow her academic focus down to reading, becoming a literacy advocate. She learned of the Ohio Literacy Resource Center at Kent State University and was hired to work on various literacy initiatives for the local community as well as the state. She assisted with an Ohio history project, participated in various activities to help parents understand the importance of early literacy, and worked with the Starbucks Foundation to develop a literacy project for



Canton-area children.

In 2002, the center received funding from the U.S. Department of Education to support GED earners attending college. The funding allowed creation of the GED Scholars Initiative, the first of its kind in the nation. Golden developed resources and partnered with university departments to develop support systems geared for these non-traditional students pursuing a college degree.

She went on to direct the Ohio Literacy Alliance, a statewide lifespan literacy initiative in partnership with Kent State University and the Ohio State University to provide literacy resources, professional development resources, and support for teachers, administrators, parents, and practitioners.

For the past six years, Golden also taught at Notre Dame College of Ohio in the teacher education and graduate programs. She enjoyed working in the small college environment, and that was part of Defiance's attraction. "You can develop personal as well as professional relationships and become part of a community that isn't spread all over a city, and I really get to know my students well," she explains. "My undergraduate work was done at a very small college. Coming right out of high school, I was intimidated by large colleges or universities, so going to a small environment was a comfortable setting."

Golden was also intrigued with the College's McMaster School for Advancing Humanity: "The opportunity to go out and do service-related scholarships in different communities, whether in another country or here in the U.S., and learn about different cultures by collaborating with faculty, staff and students is a wonderful opportunity to do work for the common good."

She likes the focus on cultural engagement and teaching in a non-traditional way. "I think it makes learning much more interesting, meaningful, and engaging. It promotes lifelong learning. Learning doesn't just stop in formal settings. It's a continuous process, and teaching in non-traditional ways promotes a sense that learning is a natural, lifelong process whether in a formal or informal setting."

Golden has already tried some non-traditional methods since coming to Defiance. She has been working with AmericaReads volunteers, designing a handbook of instructional reading strategies and methods for AR volunteers from DC who work in area schools.

She also wants to develop a reading endorsement in the college's graduate education program. "There are so many children struggling to read - which is one of the most fundamental skills needed to be academically successful," she says. "Some children really lack strong skills and strategies to comprehend text and become fluent readers." One way to help children become better readers is to train teachers to identify those students and provide strategies to assist them in becoming better readers.

Coming from an urban area, Golden says she has observed marked differences in student success. In the Cleveland area, she saw higher absenteeism among students and teachers, higher incidence of varying learning disabilities, and larger classroom settings. "I was really impressed with proficiency test scores here in the Defiance area,"

she says. "I think it has a lot to do with small class size which allows teachers more opportunities to do one-on-one interaction and develop different strategies for working with struggling students."

Golden engaged her students in a community literacy project during the spring semester. With the cooperation of Biggby's Coffee, Domino's Pizza, Northtowne Mall, the Pilgrim Library, and the Defiance Public Library, more than 1,000 children's books were collected for distribution to area youngsters. In addition, the early childhood education students sponsored a Family Fun Day with book readings, crafts and games.

She also conducted a diversity workshop at this year's McMaster Symposium. Her goal was to get people to explore, celebrate, respect, and acknowledge our differences so that we can be open to learn about all of our similarities, which oftentimes far outweigh our differences. "To acknowledge and bring about awareness that we are all human regardless of race, age, gender, etc. is so important in our very multicultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-racial society."



## LITERACY FACTS

More than 20% of adults read at or below a fifth grade level - far below the level needed to earn a living wage. The National Adult Literacy Survey found that over 40 million Americans age 16 and older have significant literacy needs.

As the education level of adults improves, so does their children's success in school. Helping low-literate adults improve their basic skills has a direct and measurable impact on both the education and quality of life of their children.

*--National Institute for Literacy*

Golden's passion for literacy and lifelong learning grew out of her own personal experience 20 years ago, when, as a single parent, she decided to earn a college degree "to better provide for my daughter." She left a job in the criminal court system to work at Case Western Reserve University where she enjoyed the collegiate setting and the opportunity to work with faculty, staff, and students in various settings. She went back to college on a part-time basis, earning a bachelor's degree in management and later focused on a career in higher education. She earned two master's degrees from Cleveland State University and completed her Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction from Kent State University.

Golden enjoys spending time with her family, including two grandchildren. And, of course, she likes to read. "I have to force myself to read things that are not academically-based," she says. Her casual reading includes biographies, novels, poetry, and books on different cultures. ◆