

Celebration of Reading by Lester Benton

Thank you, Mrs. Bush. I am very honored to be here tonight.

I have struggled with my reading since I was in elementary school right here in Houston. I was a pretty good student in math and science, but reading was always a problem for me.

I was labeled a slow learner when I was about 12 years old and put in an alternative school. The chance to learn stopped with that school where all we did was play games.

By the time I convinced my mother to help get me back into regular school, I was two years behind. I was moved along in high school and graduated, and I tried college—but it didn't work out. All my life I was embarrassed about my reading and writing problems, and I hid them away as best I could.

But these problems affected my life in many ways, from my marriage to my ability to make a good living. I had low paying jobs for most of my life. My family always knew I had a problem and tried to help me. I always asked them for help with spelling and I relied on them to help me understand the meaning of words. You see, for me, words were just words on paper. I couldn't grasp the meaning of them when they were strung together.

And then, two things happened that changed my life. My sons, Kevin and Christopher helped me with reading as they were developing their own reading skills.

Two years ago, Christopher, when he was just 8 years old and in the third grade, was helping me with the meaning of some words. He said to me, "Dad, you are *old*, why can't you read?"

I realized at that moment that I was going to go somewhere to find someone to help me.

I had always believed that I was smart enough to fix my problem if someone could help me figure it out. I knew I couldn't do it on my own. I googled **READING** on the computer and began to search for help. And...I found it. I found Literacy Advance of Houston and in a very short time, after putting aside the embarrassment about my reading and writing, I was working with my first volunteer tutor.



Lucky for me, he was a Frenchman. He would say to me “you have to fall in love with the story”. One day, he had me read a section in a book and then write down what it meant to me. I read and I wrote—crossed it out, wrote it again and crossed it out. This continued until I finally wrote something that really made sense to me.

I realized I had just written the first paragraph I could remember. Tears came to my eyes, and I could not stop crying.

My second tutor, Pat McCracken, who is here tonight, has helped me make more progress in my reading skills. I finished reading my first book, “The Things They Carried” a wonderful book about soldiers in the Vietnam War by Tim O’Brien. I learned what it is like to “fall in love with a story”.

After all the years of struggling, my life has changed. I am taking courses at Houston Community College. I will get my degree, one course at a time. I have the best job I have ever had at Walgreens Distribution Center. I have been able to grow in my job because of my new skills and the confidence I have in myself.

Over the years, my wife and I encouraged our children to learn to read and to do the best they can in everything they do. My Children are here tonight — my sons, Kevin and Christopher, and one of our daughters, Jessica. Our other daughter, Elsa, who is studying to be a CPA, lives in Washington, DC. When Jessica was in high school her teachers called us in to tell us she was an exceptional student—I was afraid that meant she was in *trouble*.

Jessica earned her degree in Chemical Engineering from RPI, and in June, she will receive her MBA from Stanford. I hope you will allow me, the Proud Father, to ask my family to stand so I can introduce them to you.

In our City, there are thousands of people like me who have serious problems with reading and writing. I hope my experience will teach my children and others that it is never too late to learn and that you should never, ever give up.

I no longer feel the shame as I am able to read and write. I continue to push myself, and I know I can overcome any problem standing in my way.

I want to thank everyone at Literacy Advance for changing my life.

And I want to thank Barbara Bush and all of you here tonight who support the essential cause of Literacy.

Thank you very much.

