

VICTORIA READ SOCIETY

# Literacy group celebrates 20th

Non-profit organization marks anniversary with open house on Friday

By Katherine Dedyna  
Times Colonist Life staff

If you had trouble reading this sentence in 1976, you were pretty much on your own.

That was before Victoria Read Society – now a well-known watchdog for literacy – was founded and ultimately rescued thousands of local residents through remedial teaching and compassion for what they had endured.

The non-profit organization is celebrating its 20th anniversary with an open house for all students, former students, parents, teachers to be held Friday at

720 Linden Ave. from 3-6 p.m. with lots of birthday cake and other goodies concocted by the current English-as-a-Second-Language class.

Executive director Melanie Austin speaks proudly of "a pretty impressive record" over the last two decades. Not only was Read Society one of the first remedial agencies in Canada, but it has helped 10,000 students, from Kindergarten to adult age.

"Our teachers and parents says it's a life-changing process – it's not just reading."

The society now has some 20 instructors, most of them full-time. Project Literacy was founded by society members about seven years ago to harness volunteer power instead of professional teachers.

Literacy issues are still incredibly painful for so many people, Austin says.

She has found that people can more easily find the strength to talk about abuse, addiction and sexual orientation than about literacy problems because of the depth and staying power of the stigma of illiteracy.

"We don't even call it illiteracy. It's a really dirty word."

In some ways, the technological revolution is further disenfranchising people with literacy problems, she says.

As voice mail increasingly becomes the first contact with offices, and even job openings are posted by the government on computers, people who lack reading and writing skills or have difficulty processing verbal instructions, are often at a loss.

Those processing problems which were never taken into account may account for the inability to read in the first place.

Financial and legal documents get ever more complicated while cryptic, confusing abbreviations, even on prescriptions, are becoming common, she says.

Not only have resource sector jobs that paid well without literacy skills disappeared, but even janitorial jobs require people to process workplace safety issues written at a post-secondary level, Austin says.

Read Society offers basic math, reading (comprehension, spelling, writing) and English as a second language.

Most people pay their own way – which is \$36 per hour for adults – but the centre will try every way it can to find funding for others. Seldom does anyone fall through the cracks.

Read Society continues to be only non-profit centre where children can attend for as little as \$10 a month and last year, 87 children attended classes on bursaries.

The society has a gaming licence and receives support from government employees, the Vancouver Foundation, individual donors, business community, service clubs and both provincial and federal governments.

For more information, call 388-7225.