

Illiteracy battle picks up steam

By Rebecca Wigod
Times-Colonist Living Editor

LAST NOVEMBER, Norm Francoeur trained for a job driving handyDART vans. He passed the driving component with flying colors and, in many other ways, appeared an ideal employee. But his prospective boss, John Cousins, couldn't hire him.

Driving the handicapped from place to place, Francoeur would have had to follow sheets giving passengers' names and destinations, and outlining their disabilities.

He wouldn't have made the grade: He couldn't read.

Francoeur, now 27, belonged to Canada's hidden vein of illiterate adults. It is vast — 3 million people can't read to a Grade 9 level, while one million can't read at all — but it is well-disguised. Too proud to admit their failing, non-readers develop impressive memories and an arsenal of other ploys to mask it.

Luckily for Francoeur, Cousins had faith in him — and knew where to turn for help. By Jan. 1, he had got Francoeur enrolled in an intensive three-month literacy class just being launched by the Victoria READ Society.

When Francoeur finished the course, his reading ability had shot up from a Grade 2 to a Grade 9 level. On April 1, he walked into the job Cousins was holding for him.

Needless to say, not everyone who is functionally illiterate fares as well. But Canadians are becoming more aware of the scope of the problem. Surveys show that 14.4 per cent of adults in British Columbia are functionally illiterate. To suppose that they are aging immigrants or country bumpkins is wrong: Seventy per cent of the illiterate live in cities, 70 per cent were born in Canada and 40 per cent are under 45.

In Britain, where the problem is rather smaller, the fight against illiteracy began earlier. Starting in 1975, the BBC ran a \$1.8-million publicity campaign, budgeting an extra \$450,000 for telephone link-ups to put students and teachers together. The campaign flushed out 155,000 people who had previously been too ashamed to seek help.

This month, however, Canadian efforts to stamp out illiteracy are gathering steam. On Wednesday, an adult-education course for the functionally illiterate met for the first time at Edward Milne high school in Sooke. Provincially, Project Literacy B.C. — a coalition of schools, community groups and concerned citizens based on the Lower Mainland — is campaigning to raise money and public consciousness. Federally, a similar drive has been launched by the Book and Periodical Development Council, which represents publishers, editors, distributors, booksellers and authors.

Through the newly formed Canadian Give the Gift of Literacy

Foundation (GTGL), the council aims to raise \$400,000 for literacy over the next three years. A number of publishers including Victoria's Press Porcepic, are donating a percentage of revenues from designated titles until the end of the year. Some bookstores, including Ivy's Book Shop and the University of Victoria Bookstore, contributed a percentage of Wednesday's profits.

A brief noon-hour event at Ivy's kicked off the GTGL campaign in Victoria Wednesday. Author Leon Rooke read his short story "Sweet Book," and the text — coupled with



Alex Barta photo

■ LINDA MACRAE: fewer jobs for non-readers

Rooke's legendary give-them-150-per-cent reading style — made the case for literacy forcefully.

Graham Haig, who is with Work Streams, a federal project that helps the chronically unemployed, spoke next. He said the people he sees are often welfare recipients aged 18 to 24, and many have illiteracy as an underlying problem.

Linda Macrae, of the READ Society, said that "everything we do in our society — to read the medicine bottle, to go out to dinner, to get from one place to another in a city — takes sophisticated reading skills."

She also made the point that fewer and fewer jobs in today's workplace can be done by non-readers. "Someone working in a warehouse years ago could be told verbally what to do. Now he gets a computer printout."

The society, which is 10 years old this month, assesses and remedies academic-skills deficits in children and adults. Until this year, its staff taught adults to read in hour-long individual sessions two to three times a week. Since January, however, it has also offered the Adult Basic Skills program — a three-month crash course that meets for five hours a day.

The program, which takes six people at a time, has a goal not only of literacy, but of employability and self-esteem.