



## Rick Kniebuehler:

**“I want to help tutors understand what it’s like to be on the learning side.”**

Back in the 1980s, Rick Kniebuehler’s ambition was to become a firefighter, but he faced a seemingly insurmountable hurdle: he could only read at a second-grade level because of a learning disability. He couldn’t read or fill out the fire department application, and he had no hope of passing the written tests. Fortunately, a staff member at the fire department referred him to Literacy Network.

It took courage to walk in to Literacy Network, recalls Rick. Adults with reading difficulties often fear being stigmatized. “Many people who can’t read are afraid. They don’t want others to know,” says Rick. “It took me three or four weeks to get comfortable with my tutors, but from there we became friends, and things worked out great,” he remembers.

“I came to the Literacy Network because I couldn’t read or spell. Spelling was my bad thing,” he notes. “If you show me a card, I can say the sound. But if you say the sound, I can’t spell the word. When I found out what my problems were, that helped quite a bit.

“My tutor said, ‘Look at me. Watch my lips, how I make the sounds. She made the sounds, and I did the same thing. That’s how I got the sounds.’”

Over time, Rick attained a sixth-grade reading level. He passed his tests at the fire department and worked as a firefighter for eighteen years. What’s more, he also passed the test to become an emergency medical techni-

cian (EMT). “My tutor would work with me on preparing for the EMT test for an extra hour after our regular session,” he recalls.

Rick soon found himself serving on the Literacy Network Board of Directors and was invited to speak to tutors and the general public. Rick was proud of his achievements, and he wanted to help others who had difficulty reading.

In the early 1990s, Rick was invited to attend national delegations on literacy issues in Washington, DC. A highlight of the conference was a speech by First Lady Barbara Bush, who made literacy a personal cause. Rick remembers her speech well. “She told us, ‘I know how you feel when you look at a written page. I feel the same way when I look at a computer screen.’”

Now retired, Rick works for a rental car company, delivering cars to cities around the Midwest. He thanks the Literacy Network for helping him get his current job, as well. “It would be hard if you couldn’t read the road signs,” he remarks. “And one thing about my tutor, she taught me how to read a map.”

Rick also volunteers at Literacy Network, helping to train new tutors. “I want to help tutors understand what it’s like to be on the learning side. I tell tutors what my problem is in case they have someone who has the same problem.”



**Literacy Network**  
Improving Lives Through Literacy

**Rick tells his story in video at [www.litnetwork.org](http://www.litnetwork.org)**

Literacy Network teaches reading, writing and speaking skills to adults and families so they can achieve financial independence, good health and greater involvement in community life. All programs are free of charge.

*Photo and Video: Narayan Mahon*