

The Learning Connection

YOUR IMPACT REPORT | SPRING 2025

Student Entrepreneur Spotlight

Meet América and Imad, two former Literacy Network students who have started their own businesses!

AMÉRICA



América with her husband, Chef Pablo Valencia, in their new restaurant

It's only the start of spring, but we're already looking forward to this summer. That's when América Silva's restaurant, Locos Casa Club, will reopen in its new, larger Stoughton location. América and her husband, Chef Pablo Valencia, co-own Locos Casa Club, which offers traditional Mexican cuisine.

Before becoming a restaurateur, América was a Literacy Network student. She arrived in Madison from Mexico City in 2014 and enrolled in classes. **"I thought it was very important that I had communication tools to have better life opportunities and being able to develop other skills in my career,"** she says.

América took ESL classes at Literacy Network for a year and then worked with one of our volunteer tutors. "What I like about Literacy Network is that there is a very inclusive environment ... **I feel very welcome, like I belonged there, like they really care about me learning English and being able to communicate.**"

After Literacy Network, América graduated from Madison College's Hospitality Management Program and began working at local hotels. She then got a job as a scheduler at UW Health, where she continues to work in addition to the restaurant.

"Literacy Network helped me to be more confident and go out there and find those opportunities," América says. **"I feel like I can do whatever I need to do for me and my family."**

Watch for re-opening information at bit.ly/LocosCasaClub.

IMAD

Looking for the perfect fit? From alterations to custom-designed gowns, Literacy Network student Imad Salha is here to help with his new business, Salha Tailoring & Wedding Designs.

Imad began tailoring at just 14 years old in his native Syria. He would attend school during the day and spend the evenings as an apprentice tailor. After working for a number of different tailoring businesses, he opened his own workshop, which developed to a large customer base. Imad left Syria for Jordan in 2012, where he operated his own tailoring shop until 2023, when he came to the U.S.

Imad knew he would need English to build his life in Madison, so he enrolled in classes at Literacy Network. **"Literacy Network is a beautiful, comfortable place to learn, and the teachers were wonderful,"** he says. "If you didn't understand something, [the instructor] wouldn't ignore it. She would try harder, once, twice, even three times to clarify things for you to make sure you understand." Imad studied in a group ESL class for a year and is now on the waitlist for a personal tutor.

Last spring, after navigating finding a location, sewing machines, and other supplies, he opened Salha Tailoring & Wedding Designs on Madison's west side. Imad is working determinedly to establish his business, focusing on publicity so that he can build his customer base and sustain the shop. "I do whatever is requested, men or women, any piece of clothing," he says.

To others new to this country, Imad shares a message of encouragement: **"I would like to tell new people to be patient and persevere in working until they achieve their goals."**

Learn more about Imad's services at www.salhatailoring.com or reach him at 608-795-3047. ■



Two of Imad's custom creations

Meet Rhonda and Jamie!

Student Rhonda and tutor Jamie are a tutoring pair in our High School Equivalency Degree (HSED) program! Below is an excerpt from a recent interview. Read the full interview at litnetwork.org/rhonda-and-jamie or by scanning the QR code.



RHONDA

Why did you decide to work with a tutor?

I needed some extra help since I haven't been in school since 1986, and I was going back to get my HSED.

Describe your experience with Literacy Network.

Educational, uplifting, beneficial, much needed.

What do you like about working with a tutor?

I feel a part of my growth and learning process. I feel like I'm developing another healthy female relationship, which has been hard for me in the past. Also, Jamie helps me see the skills I have that I don't think I have. She makes me work for it.

How has tutoring helped you work toward your goals?

It has helped me keep a healthy routine and be accountable (having to show up every Saturday morning at the same time/place). **It's helped me think about my long-term quality of life outside just having the basics.** I feel like I can be honest with Jamie, which helps me to think about the bigger picture of my life. She doesn't give advice, but she helps me think of things from different perspectives. She's a safe outlet when I get overwhelmed with the assignments.

What's next?

Once I get my diploma, I'm going to take a course in case management at Madison College or maybe a CNA course. I want to be a clinical support technician in a recovery facility.



Rhonda (L) and Jamie (R) have been working together since Fall 2024.

JAMIE

What do you like about tutoring with Literacy Network and working with Rhonda?

As a busy professional, I really appreciate how organized the Literacy Network's volunteer programs are. The training, guidance, and follow-up are all excellent, which makes it easy to plug in.

Rhonda is my first student with the Literacy Network. She is so determined and resilient! After not being in school for almost 40 years, she is learning so much all at once – how to use a computer and navigate the internet and word processing programs plus her course materials. She takes it all in stride, and it's very inspiring.

How has tutoring with Literacy Network impacted your life?

There's so much in the world that feels out of my control. **Knowing I can do something tangible each week to make one person's life just a little bit better is really empowering.** ■

Welcome (Back!), Ezi

Literacy Network is pleased to announce longtime adult education champion Ezi Adesi, M.Ed, is the new Director of Omega School of Literacy Network. Ezi brings over a decade of experience to lead the Omega high school equivalency programs, which became part of Literacy Network this January.

Ezi began his career at Omega School as a GED instructor. Next, he became Director of Adult Basic Education at Literacy Network, where he spent six years. Ezi left Literacy Network in 2019 but always remained connected to the organization and its mission. He is excited to be back with both organizations in his role with the newly joined nonprofits and has already started to build strong relationships with students.

"I connect personally with each student that comes through the door," Ezi says. "My priority is to lead with compassion, to continue and grow Omega's and Literacy Network's long traditions of creating a safe, welcoming, and warm environment where students get the support they need to fulfill their dreams." ■





“When you don’t have much and you don’t know the laws... you feel like your eyes are covered. Right now I know my rights and new doors are going to open for me.”

- Vicente, 2024 Citizenship student speaker

Help Us Celebrate Growing Together at Reading Between the Wines!

Students will reflect on this year’s event theme, “Together We Grow,” and share inspiring stories about their dreams and goals, including becoming U.S. citizens, earning their GEDs or HSEDs, securing improved job opportunities, and supporting their children’s health and educational needs. Register to participate in the online auction, attend the event, or both!



Scan to register or visit litnetwork.org/RBTW2025.

EVENT DETAILS

THURSDAY, APRIL 24, 2025

5:30 – 7:30 p.m.

THE BLACK BUSINESS HUB

2352 S Park St | Madison, WI 53713

TICKETS

\$60 each for in-person attendance

- *Hors d’oeuvres from student-owned restaurants*
- *Wine sampling*
- *Book of student stories*
- *Cash bar available*

SCHEDULE

Social time will be followed by a brief program featuring student, staff, and supporter stories.

REGISTER ONLINE

litnetwork.org/RBTW2025

Registration closes April 20 at 5pm.

Don’t miss our \$20 wine pull, featuring bottles ranging from \$15-\$40 in value.

ONLINE AUCTION: APRIL 10 TO APRIL 24, 2025

This year’s auction includes tickets for great family outings, gift cards to local stores, a wide range of art, and more!

SPONSORS



Questions? Interested in event sponsorship or donating an item for the online auction?

Contact Margaret Franchino at margaret@litnetwork.org or 608-268-6578.



MISSION:

Literacy Network helps adults in Dane County build skills, reach goals, and connect communities.

Dear Literacy Network Community,

Like so many others, members of the Literacy Network community are worried about the potential impact of recent changes in federal policies for immigration enforcement, asylum, and refugee resettlement, as well as funding for grant programs. At Literacy Network, **we aim to be a force of stability and decency amidst disruption and indifference to the welfare of individuals seeking safety and opportunity.**

Right now, we are focusing on safety and access to reputable information. We are maintaining our buildings as safe places to study. Classrooms in our buildings are private spaces and are not open to search by law enforcement without our invitation or a judicial warrant. We are sharing information and resources about individual rights, in alignment with our work teaching civics for citizenship classes. We do not ask people to provide information about immigration status before welcoming them to study at Literacy Network.

As I write this, we do not know if or when federal grant monies we receive for programs—namely funding for citizenship classes and English classes for refugees—will be cut or eliminated. We will share any news on funding when it is certain.

I do not wish to speak with you, answer your questions, or sign or hand you any documents based on my 5th Amendment rights under the United States Constitution.

I do not give you permission to enter my home based on my 4th Amendment rights under the United States Constitution unless you have a warrant to enter, signed by a judge or magistrate with my name on it that you slide under the door.

I do not give you permission to search any of my belongings based on my 4th Amendment rights.

I choose to exercise my constitutional rights.

These cards are available to citizens and noncitizens alike.

For more info go to www.ilrc.org

Know Your Rights Red Cards are available in multiple languages.

I speak for the entire Literacy Network community in expressing deep appreciation for our students, staff, volunteers, and supporters who treat one another with decency and make Literacy Network a welcoming environment for all.



In community,

Robin Ryan

Robin Ryan