

James and Laura: Learning Together

Laura McNamara has always had a fondness for public libraries and adult literacy. When she got her master's degree in 2007 in library sciences from Clarion University the classes were held at the Free Library's central location. She found the Mayor's Commission on Literacy (MCOL), then located at the Free Library, volunteering with different students each time. From MCOL she went on to Center for Literacy (CFL) and was assigned a student in March 2015.

As an "electronic resources librarian" at Thomas Jefferson University Hospital Laura McNamara knows computers and libraries. She put both skills to work – technology and the love of the written word – to help student James Zuber improve his reading and writing, and to show him how to better use his smart phone.

When James bought a new smart phone, Laura helped him learn how to use the features, including how to text and how to access the Internet. He enjoys texting positive messages. "I am now doing things that I never thought I ever would do," says James.

Laura calls James "one of the most motivated people that I have ever met. I'm in awe of his work ethic. His reading has improved, from memorizing words to breaking down the words into sounds. Now he can pronounce words that he didn't know before . . . He does a lot of work outside of our sessions."

James realized in 12th grade that he had a reading disability. He ended up dealing drugs and was in jail for 10 years. Growing up in North Philadelphia, his family was always a big supporter and prayed for him. He changed his life for the better in 2005 and now, at age 46, he has a good full-time job on an assembly line "catching" boxes that fast food restaurants use to put the food in. He sees his nine-year old son daily and they read together. He would love to work for the City of Philadelphia as a sanitation worker or a laborer.

James and Laura now spend two evenings a week at CFL. James feels blessed to get the tutoring and one of the exercises that he did with Laura was to write an essay for his church to become a deacon:

"I thank God For Blessing me to be A Deacon in the Church. I Feel Good about myself that The Lord Gave me a third Chance. My Mother Prayed For me to Get My life in Order and told me that if I don't get my life together I will go back to Jail. My Sister stayed on my back and I Had to make a change and I asked myself do I want to live or die. Then I went to church and The Lord Blessed my mind and I got Baptised in the name of Jesus. The Lord Blessed me to become A Deacon in the Church. I thank Jesus For Blessing My mind."

Laura values the opportunities that she received early in her career and wants to give back to the community. On her first job she recalls that she asked her boss, who later became a mentor, what would happen if she logged into a server and made a mistake, would she break the computer? He said "yes" and pulled out a white board and "showed me the basics." Now she maintains a system similar to that at Jefferson.