

Reaching down to lift up another is a good exercise

“Every day is Saturday.” So said Annapolitan Cynthia Palmer when I asked her how she liked retirement.

Before retiring, Cynthia was a high-performing research manager at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

“My work was fulfilling, but I really looked forward to retirement — not for endless leisure, but for the gift of free time that would come with retirement.”

In 2011, Cynthia and her husband, Jim Brooks, a financial planner, both retired. They loved sailing, so they decided to move from Wilmington, Del. to the nation's sailing capital. They now live on the ground floor of a waterfront Back Creek condo. The ground floor permits Cynthia and Jim to stay active in gardening; the waterfront location includes a slip for “Neverland,” their Crealock 34 sailing vessel.

They leave Annapolis to live on their boat at least four months a year. They've sailed the New England coast up to Maine, and this fall they will head down the Intracoastal Waterway to explore Florida, the Bahamas and points south.

But sailing is just the tip of the iceberg. Enrichment activities abound — including

gardening, book clubs, yoga, watercolor painting, live theater, international home exchanges and the Eastport Yacht Club.

During the months Cynthia and Jim live in Annapolis, Cynthia spends a large slice of her time as a volunteer for the nonprofit Anne Arundel County Literacy Council, where she tutors in English as a Second Language to the foreign-born.

Cynthia was attracted to the all-volunteer Literacy Council because of a personal experience. Earlier in her career, she lived and worked in Belgium, where she had to learn French. The transition was hard, but she did it. She also lived in Montreal for 10 years, where the French they speak is not the French she learned in Belgium. Because of these experiences as a language “outsider,” Cynthia committed herself to help others struggling with literacy.

Cynthia's current student is a young woman who came to the U.S. from China five years ago with her husband and son.

Cynthia says, “Helping people become more functionally literate in English — whether immigrants or



BONUS YEARS

By Phil Burgess

native-born — is one of the most rewarding things I've done. It's rewarding because you touch one person and see a difference. You see a difference in self-confidence that comes with achievement. You see the joy and optimism that come from acquiring a skill that will let you get a better job and take care of

your family.”

As I listened to her story, I thought of Maryland's abolitionist hero, Frederick Douglass, who said, “Once you learn to read, you will be free forever.”

Cynthia Palmer is just one of 135 currently active literacy tutors — including many young people — who have been trained by the critically important but underfunded Anne Arundel County Literacy Council.

Lisa Vernon, the director and spark plug of the Council has a passion for literacy that, like Cynthia's, comes from a personal experience. “I was living in Aarhus, Denmark where my husband was on sabbatical at the university. My children attended a

Danish school, where all instruction was in Danish. As they quickly gained fluency, it was frustrating for me not to know the language they were now using. So, I started to learn Danish. What a difference it made — in my state of mind and in my relationships.”

Lisa told me her experience with illiteracy in a foreign language made her extremely sensitive to U.S. citizens who are unable to read and write the English language.

Lisa said, “Anne Arundel County has more than 70,000 people who are not fully literate. I strongly believe that those who didn't learn to read and write in school should have a second chance. I also believe that if someone wants to become an American and raise their family here, they should have the opportunity not only to learn to speak English, but also to read and write in English. That's not only the right thing to do; it is in the community's interest to do it — to equip them to be productive members of our society.”

Today, the Literacy Council has more than 100 active tutor/student matches. Most are basic literacy, not ESL, and all receive free, individualized literacy instruction.

Cynthia Palmer is a prime example of using your bonus years to improve the lives of others. As 20th century radio talk show host Bernard Meltzer once said, “There is no better exercise for your heart than reaching down to help lift someone up.” And Lisa Vernon is a prime example of passionate heroism, making a huge

difference by making it possible for others to make a difference.