



The CommUUnicator

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Tutor's Message: "It's Never too Late"

By Chris Lassiter

Roberta Patterson knows personally the difference a tutor can make. Before she received her electrical engineering master's degree from Cal State Northridge, Patterson was a third-grader who couldn't read. "They didn't know what dyslexia was when I was in school," said Patterson, who grew up in Buffalo, NY. "When I was in school, I couldn't read. I couldn't really read to my grade (level) until I was 12. It was very traumatic. Kids knew who the good readers were, and who couldn't read. It was just assumed you weren't very smart if you couldn't read. It was quite hard on me."

In Patterson's story, a little help made all the difference. "My parents got me private tutors, and also the state school that taught teachers did a summer program," Patterson said. "In the summer, I went there to be coached in reading. It took some time, but by the time I was 12 or 13, I knew I could read." That led to what Patterson describes as her Rocky Balboa moment.

"If you've seen *Rocky*, the library in Buffalo is not as big as the Philadelphia Library, but it's built in that style," she said. "I remember getting a book out of the library when I was 12 or 13, and standing at the top of the stairs with this Rocky attitude like, 'I can read this book!'"



Girls can do math! Reading wasn't the only academic challenge Patterson faced. She was a math whiz, but she grew up in an era when females were discouraged from studying mathematics. "Unfortunately, I was told back in the 50s that girls couldn't do math," Patterson said. "It was very discouraging. Girls weren't allowed in drafting or technical drawing classes. They couldn't go to the technical high school. It was assumed that girls couldn't do that. And even if we fought it in public education, no one in 1962 would have hired a girl."

Patterson received her nursing degree from D'Youville College in Buffalo. At age 40, however, she was presented the opportunity to do something with her mathematical gifts. "Cal State Northridge had Women in Science and Engineering – the WISE program," she said. "It was sponsored by the National Foundation of Sciences. They had grants. The program was designed to get women with bachelor's degrees in science working in technology."

Giving Back. Patterson retired from Thomas Ramo Woolridge Aerospace Corporation as a test engineer. After visiting a friend in Staunton, she thought it would be a great place to enjoy retirement and was far more cost-efficient than living in Los Angeles. A few months ago, Patterson learned about the [SAW Tutoring Network](http://www.sawtutoringnetwork.org) and quickly got involved. She'll never forget that feeling of

standing on top of the library steps with that Nancy Drew book, and she wants to help others realize they can learn, too. “You can’t let other people define you,” Patterson said. “They may be smart, but smart in different ways. Academic smarts isn’t the only way you could be smart. When I was a kid, that’s how people were defined.”

The retired engineer has been a welcome addition to the SAW Tutoring Network. “Roberta is genuinely concerned for students, and her enthusiasm for the program has made a noticeable difference to us,” said Sarah Mendonca, founder of the SAW Tutoring Network. “She is eager to learn about new resources so that she can become more helpful in her tutoring sessions, and she knows from personal experience how powerful this kind of help can be in a child’s development.”

Hillary Getsey, the tutoring program coordinator, agrees. “Roberta is a wonderful asset to our program. We’re so grateful she’s chosen to volunteer with us. She cares deeply about treating each child with dignity and respect, and she is a great tutor and cheerleader for our students.”

When Patterson went back to college to pursue her master’s degree at age 40, she’d often receive help from other students half her age. She doesn’t think seeking out tutoring has to be scary. “It’s OK to ask for help,” Patterson said. “You’re not too old to ask. You’re not too young to ask.”

This article was recently featured in the email newsletter of the Staunton Augusta YMCA. The author, Chris Lassiter, is the Y’s marketing and communications manager.

Community News

Plastic On Purpose (POP Plastic for short) is a new commercial initiative located in Staunton that re-fabricates local plastics into raw material used in original products, designed for enjoyment and circular-economy education. Its motto is **Refabricate** (making new things out of old plastic), **Reproduce** (keeping more plastic waste out of our land, air and sea) and **Relearn** (getting the community involved by providing education on plastic waste). [POP Plastic](#) is now accepting #2 and #5 plastic that is cleaned and de-labeled. You can drop your plastic off at [Refill Renew](#) (parking lot and entrance on Lewis St.) or contact POP Plastic for a group collection.

The Fifth Annual Harrisonburg International Women's Day celebration will be this Saturday from 10:00 to 11:30 a.m. This year’s theme is “Choose to Challenge.” Because of limitations on in-person gatherings, the program will be online only. But there will be music, dance, speakers and an inter-generational panel on inclusion. For details, check the event’s [FaceBook page](#) or contact our member Heather Banks.

