

# Corinne Ratsimihah:

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When Corinne Ratsimihah appeared at US Customs with her children a year and a half ago, she had only a very rusty command of English. The customs official asked her the purpose of her visit, and she was stumped.

“I understood, but I couldn’t tell him my reason for coming here,” she recounts. Corinne’s embarrassment over the incident made an impression. “Not being able to converse in English was no good for me or my children. I saw I wouldn’t be able to help them.” She resolved, that day, that she would find a way to improve her English.

A few days later, the family spotted the sign for Literacy Network. “I said, ‘that’s a good place for me. Stop! I need to have some information, and I need to do it right away!’” She learned that Literacy Network offered evening classes.

“For a person like me who has children at home, it’s really hard to figure out hours and schedules. With evening classes, you can figure out a way to do it,” says the mother of six. Soon, she was attending classes and working with a tutor.

“At first, when I read something in English, maybe I could understand it, but I couldn’t say anything.” That situation didn’t last long. Besides class, she spent hours in Literacy Network’s computer lab studying with the Rosetta Stone software. She joined a conversation group and met every week with her tutor. She also took the health literacy class, which prompted her to make a career change.

“We went to St. Mary’s hospital. That was really interesting for me.” She met doctors and nurses who talked about their work at the hospital.

“I thought, I love to take care of people. To be able to listen,

to talk with someone, to help them with their health—that seemed like work that would give me the happiest life.” Corinne graduated in December 2011 from the Certified Nursing Assistant program at Madison College.

This fall, Corinne won Wisconsin Literacy’s statewide **Outstanding Learner on a Career Pathway Award** for her work toward a new career. When Corinne was told she had been selected, she says she was happy—but also surprised.

“I said, ‘what? Me? I only did what I wanted to do. I had to do it, for my children and myself.’”

Communicating with her children’s teachers is also now possible. “Last year, when I went to the parent-teacher conference, I thought, ‘oh my gosh, I hope they don’t say a lot of stuff because I can only say yes or no.’ This year, the conference went better,” she says. Because she understood a problem with her son, she was able to make sure he is doing his homework.

“I still work with my tutor, who is also my friend. If I want to talk about something—anything—I call her.” Her tutor has explained aspects of American culture that can perplex a newcomer. “I love American food! Just the other day, I made ‘The Best Ever Banana Bread. And I used American measures. I told myself that I’m in America now, so I’ll do things the American way.’”

Her advice to other people in the process of learning: “Work hard, and have a goal in your life. If you have a goal, you can do it. Give yourself a challenge every day. Sometimes you get frustrated, and you feel as if you don’t understand anything. But if you work hard, maybe it will become easy.”



**Literacy Network**  
Improving Lives Through Literacy

Corinne tells her 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