

The Boston Globe

First Literacy of Boston celebrates a year of success amid pandemic challenge

By Katie Redeker Globe Correspondent, Updated November 5, 2021, 3:40 p.m.



Ciro Valiente, a recipient of a scholarship from First Literacy, holds the two Boston/New England Regional Emmy Awards he received in June for news producing for Telemundo New England. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

November 8, 2021 - **Ciro Valiente** arrived in the United States in 2014 from Venezuela, unable to read or write in English, adding to the challenge he felt trying to adapt in a new country.

Today he's an Emmy Award-winning producer at NBC Boston, helping to bring a world of news to Massachusetts viewers. And he says he couldn't have learned to adapt to a new language and culture without the help of First Literacy, a Boston-based adult education program.

He used \$2,000 in scholarship money from the nonprofit to attend Bunker Hill Community College. He now serves on First Literacy's board, helping to pave the way to success for other adult learners.

"I remember seven years ago, I couldn't see the light at the end of the tunnel. It was so hard to start from zero, even though I was a professional in my country," Valiente, 31, said from his home in Stoughton. "First Literacy helped me to keep improving, to make a better life for me and my family."

On Friday, First Literacy celebrated another year of success, despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic that forced its educational partners to reimagine learning. A virtual event called "Spotlight on Innovation in Adult Basic Education — New Ways to Level the Playing Field" brought together six organizations that received grant funding during the last school year to share stories of their success.

With the pandemic upending traditional learning, First Literacy encouraged grant recipients to consider innovative ways to connect with students, executive director Terry Witherell said. "This year, we've all seen this digital divide, and the different aspects of COVID that have really impacted some of the most vulnerable," Witherell said. "By helping these programs identify ways that they can reach out to adult learners, we're finding new ways to level the playing field."

The YMCA of Greater Boston International Learning Center received a \$4,235 grant to create "The Connection Project," which enabled 15 students to create a blog called "New American Voices: Creative Self-Expression" that they filled with their own essays, photos, and videos. "The Connection Project was an idea that I had to bring students together during the pandemic, and give them a space for self expression that didn't always rely on their English ability," said Grace Murray, a recruitment manager for the center. "We really love working with First Literacy, because they encourage these sort of creative, out-of-the-box courses, and they give us the means to do it." Murray and Sarah Poole, who also works with the YMCA's educational programs, discussed the successes of the project during Friday's event.

"The common theme here is community, and connection with your community, finding and using your voice in the community," Poole said in an interview before the event. "That's something that I really appreciate about the First Literacy grant program, that they provide us with this space for students to explore and use their voices in very creative ways."

Founded in 1988 as the Boston Adult Literacy Fund, First Literacy now provides grants to nonprofit adult basic education and English language learner programs across Massachusetts. They also fund college scholarships and provide free professional development to adult basic education teachers.

Witherell said the annual grants celebration is an important forum for recipients to discuss their programs and find inspiration in their shared mission of improving literacy skills.

"The biggest benefit of this program is that educators can learn from each other things that have been tried, like new program ideas or projects, and those are shared with colleagues so that others can benefit from what was learned in trying a new program," she said.

Keynote speaker Dr. Rima Rudd, a professor at the Harvard School of Public Health, planned to discuss the importance of health literacy. Without proper literacy skills, people face barriers to understanding their personal health and the health care system, she said.

"I see health literacy as a social justice and equity issue because it can contribute to reducing disparities," Rudd said in interview before the event. "It builds on accessible information, on accessible care and services ... taking in diverse perspectives. It's a very powerful and innovative field, and I see the adult education sector as contributing to that."