

When Michael Stephenson retired to the Columbia Gorge 12 years ago, he knew he wanted to find meaningful activities that would involve helping people. After all, he had spent 33 years in careers focused in public service – as an ocean lifeguard and a park ranger.

Michael learned that Columbia Gorge Community College was looking for people to volunteer as tutors in their literacy program. He thought he might try it. Ten years later, he practically gushes describing the many students he has assisted and the friendships he has developed with those students as a result of this rewarding program. He says, “It’s as much a benefit to myself as it is to the students.”

He’s amazed at the dedication of his students, most of whom are employed 40 to 60 hours a week, then meet with Michael after work to better themselves—examples include studying for the GED exam, applying for a driver’s license, improving their writing, or passing the test for U.S. citizenship. Always, the program is geared to students’ individual goals and aspirations.

Many of his students are English language learners. He says, “You have the opportunity to get a look at other cultures. These people are coming here to learn English. They’ve already made the decision to leave homeland, leave their families and places of comfort to come to this country. They’ve also chosen to better themselves so their children can have a better future and contribute to this community.” His students come from all over the world, including China, Samoa, Indonesia, Thailand and many Spanish-speaking countries.

In a typical partnership, the coordinators of CGCC’s literacy program match up tutors with students. Once assigned, Michael and his student(s) get together at the beginning of the semester to decide what goals they want to work on. The College is happy to make resources available to the tutors to help the students achieve their goals.

Michael often works for multiple years with the same students. Over time, they become more than tutor and student; they have developed strong friendships. Recently, Michael and his wife were invited to the high school graduation party of a student's daughter. Michael says, "We felt very honored to be invited into that family group. We really enjoyed that."

Michael encourages prospective tutors to join the volunteer program. He says, "It's a way to give back to the community. In a selfish sense, it's extremely rewarding. You meet some of the nicest, most grounded people and folks that have made the decision to better themselves...you can't beat that."