Nova Scotia’s champion for literacy
By Sarah Dobson, Dartmouth Learning Network Volunteer

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At the Dartmouth Learning Network, lives are being impacted in a big way. Lesley Dunn, executive director of the organization says that literacy rates in Canada and Nova Scotia are “shockingly low.” In her position, Dunn champions the cause of literacy in Nova Scotia, a problem that many people don’t even know exists.

“We live in a knowledge based society,” Dunn explains. Unfortunately, 38 per cent of Nova Scotians lack the “essential literacy skills” to reach their potential. It may also surprise some that 212,700 people over the age of 20 in Nova Scotia do not have their high school diploma.

It’s the need to reduce those numbers that keeps Dunn on her feet. The Dartmouth Learning Network has been offering free adult literacy programs for the past 27 years. Dunn says that “the organization was doing great work, offering comprehensive and steady programs for learners at every level,” but something was missing. In March 2012 Dunn stepped in as executive director to raise the profile of the organization and to effect even greater change.

In the past, Dunn has held positions with Phoenix Youth and the Lung Association of Nova Scotia working with the transplant recipient program. Both positions allowed her to see the direct results of her work. That’s what she loves about her work at the Dartmouth Learning Network, “the excitement of starting something new and seeing it through.”

“When there are low literate parents in a home, a snowball effect is created,” says Dunn. In the 1990s she stepped in to halt this snowball effect when over 70 workers lost their jobs in the collapse of a rural Nova Scotia town’s fishing industry. “There were lots of people who may have worked in the industry for 20 years, but if they don’t have their GED, unfortunately most employers won’t even look at them.” She developed a literacy program that gave the unemployed workers the skills needed to continue their “lifelong learning journey.”

Dunn has been integral in establishing the Right to Literacy Campaign in Canada, with the Dartmouth Learning Network leading the campaign nationally. It began in the U.S. in 2009 as part of UNESCO’s decade of literacy. In August of 2013, Dunn launched the Declaration for the Right to Literacy – a scroll that can be signed to show commitment to boosting literacy rates in communities across Canada.

Dunn proudly shares that NDP leader Thomas Mulcair and Liberal leader Justin Trudeau have both signed the scroll while visiting the area. “It’s all about getting people to pay attention to the cause,” she says. Other noteworthy Canadians that have signed the scroll are: all three Nova Scotia political party leaders, Stephen Lewis, Jian Gomeshi and many more.

“Literacy rates just don’t seem to budge, and for a lot of reasons,” says Dunn. Through her work at the Dartmouth Leaning Network and in introducing the Right to Literacy Campaign, she’s determined to understand why low literacy continues to hinder some. She then hopes to see Nova Scotia communities flourish through encouraging “lifelong learning.”

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