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From the President's Laptop

BY MRA PRESIDENT CYNTHIA CLINGMAN

Dear friends of MRA,

Michigan Reading Association was formed in 1956. Our first president, Edgar DeForest, director of Reading Improvement Services at Michigan State University, was a true advocate for literacy. The MRA Silver Anniversary (1981) memento program book listed De Forest's theme of the First Annual MRA Conference as: *Improving Classroom Practice*. What a visionary! How did he know that as educators of literacy we would still be focused on this topic in 2005?

Improving Classroom Practice. Have we been successful? Classroom practices emerged and changed over time with different names, but all were intended to help the learner, both young and mature. If we are looking for evidence of success, let's look at the adult readers of today. Are they literate lifelong learners? Some indicators to consider are library use, bookstore purchases, and lifelong learning endeavors of the mature reader.

In 2002, the American Library Association reported that libraries in the U.S. were visited 1,244,348,000 times by readers of all ages. Of readers over the age of 18, 62 percent have a library card and use it to take out books, consult a librarian, use reference materials, read newspapers and magazines, or connect to the Internet.

In 2004 Amazon.com announced that during the holiday season it sold over 2.8 million items or 32 items per second in a single day. People with expendable money are buying books.

In the first national survey of its kind, researchers from AARP found that of learning preferences among Americans 50 or older, newspapers, magazines, books,



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and journals are most often the tools used for learning by 64 percent of that group. Respondents say they are interested in learning to keep up with what's going on in the world, for their own spiritual or personal growth, or for the simple joy of learning something new.

Nora Barkey, contract coordinator for the Area on Aging of Western Michigan, notes that as most baby boomers enter retirement, "They want education and they seek to be involved in their community." As a result, many are flocking to area colleges for more education, not for credit, but for the "love of learning." Aquinas College Emeritus program in the western Michigan area attracts over 1,000 students a year! They study topics like writing, history, art, and archeology. They will often read and research on their own in order to learn more. This phenomenon exists across the country.

Evidence that our classroom practices improved over these 50 years does exist. Our very literate world of mature readers proves this point.

Let's celebrate these successes of lifelong literacy this year during our 50th year of the Michigan Reading Association.

Cynthia Clingman
2005-2006, MRA president