The Right to Read

BY ROBERT L. SMITH

RUTH COLVIN was in Ecuador early last summer, chatting with its First Lady about her favorite cause—literacy—when the nominations for the President's Volunteer Action Awards were being sorted out back in Washington.

That the selection committee chose to bestow the highest honor on her over many, including the winner, who was somewhere in the Andes when a telex was sent to find her, was a surprise to many, including the winner, who was somewhere in the Andes when a telex was sent to find her.

She never got it, and so arrived home only to jump back on a plane and fly off again, to Washington, D.C., to accept the award. There she lunched with President Reagan, finding him unremarkable but charming, before rushing back to Syracuse and her work, always her work, with Literacy Volunteers of America (LVA).

The group that insists everyone be able to read was 25 years old last year. For much of its history, since its founding by Colvin in Syracuse in 1962, there were few honors and little acclaim. Yet a lot has changed in a quarter of a century for LVA, a sprawling organization with influence stretching from the White House to Third World capitals.

Ruth Colvin founded Literacy Volunteers of America in her basement, back in 1962. It is now an agency of international proportions.

Ironically, the woman who has spent a lifetime teaching has no formal teaching degree or experience. She does have three honorary doctorates: from SU, where she also earned a bachelor's degree in business administration in 1959; Marymount College; and the State University of New York, via Onondaga Community College in Syracuse.

Colvin was the oldest of five children, raised in the Swedish community on Chicago's South Side. Her father died young, at age 38, and with the war and responsibilities at home, she was not able to finish a degree she'd started at Northwestern University. She enrolled in business college and took a job with a lawyer. She learned typing, shorthand. "I was always good at organization"—a claim her friends find a glaring understatement.

With education for this country's illiterate adults in 1963 consisting mostly of scattered vocational programs, Colvin had to all but create it. She was a housewife and mother of two young children, intrigued by the international literacy efforts of the late Dr. Frank Laubach, when she read in the local newspaper of 11,000 illiterate adults in the city of Syracuse.

"That shocked me," she says today. "I thought, 'Why isn't anybody doing anything?'"

So she did, creating the first volunteer literacy force in the country. The sheer size of the accomplishment can only be understood in light of what there was to work from. Colvin and her early core of volunteers wrote the first workbooks, lesson plans, and training manuals themselves. When her dream required tutors, they were recruited, at first by the handful and later by the dozens. In 1961 and 1962 alone she spoke at more than 90 Syracuse-area churches.

"She just hooked people," says Jean Daugherty, one of the early literacy volunteers (and an SU alumna, classes of 1948 and 1972). "Here was this one woman starting out to save a corner of the world, and the thing was, she hooked you. I mean, you could make a difference all by yourself. She convinced you of that."

Colvin borrowed shamelessly from reading experts at SU and other programs, constantly updating and expanding her own. "Show me a better way to teach reading, and I'll do it," she says.

Today, her method of teaching is practiced by LVA chapters in 275 communities in 35 states, including four states that have adopted it in their prison systems.

RUTH COLVIN IS arguably the city of Syracuse's most influential citizen, though a Syracusan might have to leave town to learn that. Colvin is or has been an advisor to education leaders in the United States, India, Turkey, Kenya, Jamaica, Zimbabwe, Jamaica, New Zealand, and South Africa.
She is a friend of the vice president’s wife. She has seen most of the world and met many of its leaders, including President Reagan, Nobel Prize winner Bishop Desmond Tutu, a maharajah, a king, a sheik, and an Indian holy man who calls her “my daughter.”

She created a volunteer literacy force that is credited with having taught some 150,000 adults to read, a program she built and marketed almost from scratch.

“She had a vision,” says Jinx Crouch, the current LVA president, who came on as a volunteer in 1969. “She just threw herself into it and inspired everybody else.”

Colvin’s enthusiasm is infectious, friends and co-workers say. She is an innovator, a sharp and inquisitive thinker who can zero in on a task and bring the best minds to work on it. She can also be very determined, to the point of being pushy, but more often is quietly resourceful.

Knowing nothing about Ecuador, a country she was to visit to help design a literacy program, she called SU. Yes, they had four exchange students from Ecuador, she was told. All four were at the Colvin home for dinner the next night.

“She has this terrific knack for finding the right people and getting their interest, getting them to help her,” says Doris “Dee” Jones, an LVA volunteer who has been with Colvin since the beginning. “She’ll always get in to see the important people, in China or wherever. It’s astonishing. She’s just so sure they’ll want to hear what she has to say.”

SUCH BRAZEN CONFIDENCE did not come free. In her book about the LVA experience, A Way With Words, Colvin relates the terror she felt upon first approaching a Syracuse charitable organization for money for a literacy program 25 years ago: “I woke that morning nearly sick with fear.”

Later, she made her case and came away with a small grant and a short lecture: “If you really believe in a cause,” she was told, “and are willing to work for it, then present your case honestly and ask for the money. Think of it as giving that other person an opportunity to share in your dreams.” It is advice that she has never forgotten.

“We all have a responsibility to share,” Colvin says with quiet conviction. She sees LVA as a system to “channel resources” that are readily available if one asks often enough, pushes hard enough.

“People will often give you what you can’t buy,” she has often said. “We’re tapping a skill here. I can’t afford these people,” she says, listing the tutors, the board members, the local companies that have donated time and talent. “But they see the dream with me. This is sharing. This is the American way.”

She is a small woman, gracious and scrupulously polite. She shows an energy that belies her age, which she is reluctant to reveal. (“I’ve been married 47 years. Let people figure it out from there.”)

Though she no longer presides over LVA’s board of directors, Colvin directs the tutor training programs that have always been her passion. And when the germ of an idea or the memory of a former student strikes, she becomes animated, restless, ready to leap off the couch and get something done.

“I’m pretty action-oriented,” she says.

TODAY, HER ADVOCACY frequently takes her abroad. Her traveling companion is her husband, Bob, who is also her best friend and closest advisor. They were college sweethearts at Northwestern. They married in 1940, shortly after his graduation, and moved to Syracuse in 1942.

They are avid golfers and bicycle three-and-a-half miles a day “to be in shape” for the world traveling that has been their passion since Bob Colvin retired a little more than 10 years ago. Between them, they figure they’ve seen most of the world. Colvin has written a book about it, Great Traveling Over 55, which she hopes to publish. Often the countries they visit have invited Colvin for consultation on literacy matters. Sometimes they’re asking for Bob, a former industrial chemical consultant.

The focus of Ruth Colvin’s future is quite certain—her literacy cause. Her two children have families and successful careers, and her work with LVA is not as demanding as it once was. She has set her sights on legislation protecting the rights of the illiterate—“If they come forward, will they lose their job?”—and convincing employers and colleges to take a larger responsibility for erasing illiteracy across the nation.

Colvin once said she would love to see herself and her volunteers having worked themselves out of a job by the year 2000. That may still be an impossible dream, but the fun is in the dreaming.

“Yes, it has been fun.” She looks surprised by the question. “It’s exciting. To think we started in my basement and it has grown into this.

“If I had any idea,” she says, shaking her head, “I would have been scared to death. All I knew was that there was a local problem and I worked on that. But I had to have the courage to listen to others and to change.”