

Saving Anna's Family

by ReadWorks

Christine closed the door to Anna's room. Inside, her friend had fallen asleep while they watched their third movie of the evening.

Downstairs, Christine's mom, Donna, was grasping Anna's mother Sheila around the shoulders. "We should go," she said. "Get some rest, huh?"

Sheila nodded, blew her nose, and then reached an arm out for Christine. Christine snaked her own skinny arm around both women, awkwardly, patting them both on the back.

On the car ride home, Christine worked up the courage to ask the question on her mind.

"Mom? Why was Sheila crying?"

She thought she knew the answer, of course: Anna's cancer. Anna had been missing a lot of school, losing hair, and sitting through, Christine knew, hours of chemotherapy sessions, in which her doctors dripped poisonous drugs into her veins in order to pinpoint and kill the cancer cells. The poison was never enough to kill Anna herself, luckily, but she'd told Christine that it left her bones feeling rubbery and her tongue rough and raw.

In the past, Anna had been the neighborhood do-gooder, always going door to door for various causes: the local animal shelter, community food banks, or the families who'd lost their homes to fire or foreclosure that she'd seen on the news. Now Anna could barely feed herself, when she had an **appetite** at all.

The doctors had hope for her **recovery**, Sheila had told Donna before, because Anna was strong and young and ready to fight. But still, Christine thought, it seemed so unfair when bad things like this happened to good people.

After a moment, Christine realized her mother hadn't answered her question. "It's Anna, isn't it?" she prompted her.

"Well, yes and no," said Donna.

"What do you mean?"

"Well..." Donna trailed off, then looked at her daughter, sitting tall and attentive in the

passenger seat. "It's **complicated**, but I guess you're old enough to understand."

"Understand what?"

"Understand that Anna is sick, yes, but Anna actually gets a lot of help. The government helps pay for a lot of her medicine. She gets meals delivered to her by a nonprofit. She even gets massages from local volunteers."

"Wow!"

"Her life's still very hard, of course, and no one would trade places with her, but when you have cancer, everyone can see that you need help," continued Donna. "They don't always see that the people around you are suffering."

"People like Sheila?"

"Yes, and that's why it's so hard to talk about," said Donna, looking uncomfortable. "Anna's whole family is **struggling**, and yet they don't want to complain because of poor Anna. They feel invisible."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, did you know that Sheila took a break from her job to stay home with Anna?"

"No!" Christine was surprised. She had never thought about who took Anna to her appointments, or fed her when she was too weak to lift a spoon. Of course it was her parents.

"Yes. So that means that many of the things they used to do with that extra money-pay for braces, vacations, new school supplies-that's all out the window now. Not just for Anna, but for her brothers, too."

"Wow." Christine looked down at her lap. She remembered spending each summer in a new state park with Anna and her family, exploring the mountains of Yosemite or the beaches of Maine. That was all gone now? For her, too?

"Yes. They're even worried now about keeping the house."

"Their *house*? So Anna might have to move, while she's sick?"

"If she doesn't get better soon, and the bills keep piling up..." Donna pulled into the driveway,

and just in time. Her cheeks were shining with tears. She fumbled around with the latch to the glove box, where she always kept a stash of wrinkled Kleenex.

"Mom, we have to do something!" Christine balled her hands into fists, cutting into her palms with the edges of her nails.

"Honey, we're not so rich ourselves," Donna said, then buried her face in the tissue. Her shoulders heaved. "I don't know what we can do."

"There has to be something," Christine said firmly. "We just have to ask ourselves: What would *Anna* do?"

TO: JESSE, ANDRES, EMILY

FROM: CHRISTINE

RE: ANNA

Guys. Anna's family needs our help. They're low on funds. They might lose their house while they're taking care of Anna. What can we do?

TO: ALL

FROM: JESSE

RE: ANNA

I could sell my guitar?

TO: ALL

FROM: ANDRES

RE: ANNA

Uh, we could give them free coffee from my aunt's cafe? ?

TO: ALL

FROM: EMILY

RE: ANNA

Not sure? My dad and I take yummy food to my grandma sometimes... we could bring them some?

TO: ALL

FROM: MADDIE

RE: ANNA

I could make them a cheer-up card in Photoshop. My brother just started teaching me!

TO: ALL

FROM: CHRISTINE

RE: ANNA

Music, coffee, food, art...all good ideas. Sounds more like a party though...

WAIT THAT'S IT!

Okay, I've got it! Meet at lunch tomorrow!

The day of the party seemed to fly by. After school, the friends lugged a big cardboard box of supplies to Andres' aunt's coffee shop, where Jesse was setting up his guitar, and Emily and her father were laying out baked goods and soup for sale. Christine pulled out a shoebox they'd decorated for donations, several photos of Anna they'd printed the day before, and some of the flyers that Maddie and her brother had made to advertise their fundraising bash.

At 6 p.m., the friends were surprised to see a line of impatient middle schoolers and their

families circling the block, waiting for the party to start. Everyone who'd been touched by Anna's good deeds, it seemed, had come to return the favor: the animal shelter employees, the families from the news, plus the many kids from school that she'd tutored or saved from bullying or just said hello to in the hallway when no one else would. They scarfed down the cookies and they stuffed the donation box, and when Jesse strummed the chords to Anna's favorite songs, they all sang along.

All together, they raised several thousands of dollars, more money than Christine had ever seen in her life. "No wonder Anna loved doing this for people," she thought. "It feels amazing."

But the best part, she mused later, was when Anna came through the door with her family, lured there with promises of chocolate cake and live music. Sheila saw the photos of Anna on the walls and started to bawl. Anna's brothers couldn't stop laughing and high-fiving their friends. Her dad lingered over the food, lapping up soup like he hadn't had a home-cooked meal in weeks. And Anna, wrapped in a blanket and tucked into a booth, just sat there smiling as Christine held her tightly.

"I was never going to give up," Anna whispered to her friend. "But I was afraid they were going to." She kissed Christine on the cheek.

"Now, I know that they've got a reason to keep going, too. They know that they've got a family to look out for them, to take care of them when they're too tired," Anna said. "They know that they're not invisible anymore."

"No way," Christine said, motioning to the group of teenagers who had come to her aid, to the roomful of neighbors all singing together. "We're *all* family."

"I think," said Anna, "that they see that now."

Never Too Late

by Samantha Gross



If you're reading this, then probably you're a student working on improving your proficiency as a reader. But you may already have more **skills** than some people much older than you. Some adults would have a hard time in your class because they never learned to read, or because they never learned to read well.

Art Ellison is the administrator of the New Hampshire State Bureau of Adult Education, which helps fund many programs for grown-ups who need to improve their **skills**. He says most people in these classes never finished high school. Some of them weren't successful students, while others dropped out of school so that they could go to work and support their families.

Not being able to read well as a grown-up can make life very difficult and cause complications at work and at home. There is also an emotional toll.

"They feel embarrassed," Mr. Ellison says. "They think that as an adult they should be able to do it."

Often, adults with difficulty reading try to hide their problem from others. For example, Mr. Ellison explains, it's not uncommon for someone applying for a job to ask if he or she can take home an application. There, the applicant can ask a friend or even a daughter or son to help

fill out the form. Others try to disguise their inability to read the options on a menu by pointing to a photograph of a dish instead, or by saying, "I'll have what that person's having."

Not being able to read at all is called illiteracy, and it can be dangerous. A person who can't read the instructions on a bottle of medication could end up in the hospital after taking too many pills, or after taking too few pills.

Many people arrive at adult education programs in the hopes of helping their children do better in school than they did, Mr. Ellison says.

"Every parent wants to-or should want to-be able to help their kids with their homework," he says. Some parents can explain schoolwork to their children, but parents who are **illiterate** can't easily help or even check if their children's homework is done.

Children can start to learn reading **skills** by looking at the words while a parent reads them a book. But parents who don't know how to read might make up a story to go with the pictures in a book, instead of actually reading the text. That can make it harder for their children to learn to read.

Changes in the United States economy have made learning to read more **urgent** for some people, Mr. Ellison says. Many people, who worked for decades in manufacturing, never needed reading **skills** at work. For example, someone who worked attaching doors onto cars may not have needed to be literate to do the job.

But at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, many American manufacturing jobs disappeared. It became cheaper for companies to manufacture things in other countries overseas. Some people who had worked for decades on an assembly line found themselves out of work. Often, the ones who couldn't read well had a hard time finding a new job, Mr. Ellison reports.

"The world changed around them," he says. For them, reading **skills** are "important because of the difficulty of getting and then keeping a job."

Men and women who want to enter job training programs to become welders and X-ray technicians are often given training manuals written at the tenth-grade level, Mr. Ellison says. People with difficulty reading often have a hard time in these programs. They can also have difficulties learning to use computers because they can't always understand the instructions that appear on a screen.

Some people graduated from high school but don't have good reading **skills**. That's partly because some schools have a policy of passing students onto the next grade, even if they haven't mastered all the material covered. That policy is called social promotion.

Grown-ups who need help learning to read and other basic **skills** can seek out classes at adult education programs funded by the federal and state governments. A person who never graduated from high school can use one of these programs to get a High School Equivalency Certificate. With that kind of certificate, a person can apply to college.

Vocabulary

illiterate

adjective

definition: not able to read or write.

Because he is illiterate, his daughter reads his mail to him.

Spanish: analfabeto

skill

noun

definition: a kind of work or craft that requires special care and training.

Painting is a skill.

Spanish: habilidad, destreza, aptitud, arte, técnica

urgent

adjective

definition: When something is urgent, it needs to be taken care of as soon as possible.

Spanish: urgente, apremiante

1. Before you start reading...

Here are the vocabulary words that will be in this reading. Let's see how well you already know them.

Check the box that shows how well you know each word. It's ok if you don't know them yet (this is not graded)!

	Don't know it	Have heard of it but not sure of its meaning	Know something about its meaning	Know it well
skill				
struggle				
urgent				

2. Word Matcher

Every word has other words that have similar meanings or even the exact same meaning (these are called synonyms!). Draw a line from each similar word or synonym to the vocabulary word that it matches!

craft

handicraft

trade

endeavor

strive

skill

struggle

urgent

push

serious

imperative

acute

3. After reading and exploring the words through some activities...

Do you know these words better? Check the box that shows how well you know each word. It's ok if you don't know them yet (this is not graded)!

	Don't know it	Have heard of it but not sure of its meaning	Know something about its meaning	Know it well
skill				
struggle				
urgent				