

Hello, and welcome back. I'm Jim Tedder in Washington. On today's program ... encouraging news about some older American citizens who are making a special effort to help young people. And then we turn to Central Europe, where, after a long struggle, Croatia has finally joined the European Union. We'll have some thoughts on how well the move will work, and hopes for the future. As It Is, a chance for you to learn English, is on your computer, and on the air.

The lack of literacy is a problem in many of the world's poorest countries. Even in wealthier countries like the United States, many children struggle to read and write. But in 19 cities across America, about 2,000 volunteers with an organization called AARP Experience Corps are helping children learn to read. The volunteers work with students in low-income areas.

AARP Experience Corps combines the capabilities of two long-established groups. AARP is a nonprofit organization that represents the needs and interests of older citizens. The Experience Corps was founded to provide reading help for children from kindergarten age to third grade. In 2011, AARP joined the Experience Corps to help match the volunteer services of older adults with the needs of children trying to gain literacy. For example, eight-year-old Kenasia Howard is reading about Native Americans. She enjoys the story. But she says some words are difficult for her.

"Big words, and sometimes small words, I forget."

She's reading with Sandy Morgan, who joined the corps three years ago after retiring. Ms. Morgan has been meeting Kenasia twice a week for six months at Miner Elementary School in Washington, D.C. She says they have built a trustful relationship and made reading fun. Ms. Morgan says the children feel comfortable with their over-50 adult helpers.

"Most of us are parents and grandparents. We get through to them. We just talk to them calmly. But we definitely have patience. But we have learned that over the years through experience."

When the children are reading, they may have problems centering their attention on the words. They may mix up letters or add words that are not there.

Dajah Staton, who is nine years old, faces those problems. Volunteer Linda Nelson is working with Dajah, who reads at the level of a beginner.

Ms. Nelson says she encourages Dajah when the girl feels like giving up. Ms. Nelson tells the child that the whole world will open for her if she can read a story and understand it.

Dajah's mother, Florita Staton, is grateful for the help from Experience Corps. Ms. Staton says without the corps, her daughter might be farther behind than she is.

The adult literacy rate in the United States is more than 97 percent. But a national reading test shows that almost 40 percent of seven- and eight-year-olds do not have basic reading skills. Studies have shown that those children are more likely to drop out of school in the future. And children from poor families are even more likely to leave.

AARP says research shows that the program helps not only the children. It also improves the skills and lives of many adults who take part.

The E.U. Has a New Member

Croatia recently joined the European Union. The country's inclusion in the EU comes after a long effort. Croatia has struggled to overcome the economic and social effects of war during the break-up of the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Christopher Cruise provides details.

The sounds of celebration marked the raising of the Croatian flag as it joined the 27 other member flags at EU headquarters on July first. So how will life change for Croatians? James Ker-Lindsay is from the London School of Economics and Political Science. He says new laws passed as part of gaining EU membership have already affected daily life.

"But, of course, it is that sense of actually being there, being part of the club, having that freedom of movement across the European Union."

Full membership means that Croatia will be able to sell its products across the EU without paying export taxes. Nadan Vidosevic is the president of the Croatian Chamber Of Commerce. He says the country is joining the EU with its eyes open.

"We will jump in the cold water and start swimming, you know. But, we decide to jump in the water, because we believe it will be at the end, something that will make pleasure to us. What is the meaning of pleasure, it is the welfare for the citizens of my country."

But after five years of economic crisis in Europe, public opinion studies show Croatians lack excitement about belonging to the EU. Mr. Ker-Lindsay says there is little confidence in EU governance.

"Polls show in actual fact, trust in European institutions is lower in Croatia than even in the United Kingdom, which is really saying something."

Croatia is suffering through its own economic crisis. The EU has already set aside \$855 million to help support Croatia this year. The EU money will aid in rebuilding cities like Dubrovnik. In 1991, the Croatian city came under attack from the Yugoslav army and navy.

Croatia's former enemy Serbia and five other Balkan nations also want to be included in the EU. The EU has called for talks on Serbian membership to begin by January.

Croatia will gain availability to the EU market. But EU will also have the Croatian market available. Many observers say uncompetitive businesses will struggle with the competition.

Mr. Ker-Lindsay said many people in southeast Europe were unhappy when the EU won the Nobel Peace Prize last year. He said they believed EU had not done nearly as much as it could have done in the 1990's. But he added that a lot of the area's peace and security currently resulted directly from the process of EU's increased size. He says that is encouraging other candidates for membership, like Serbia. I'm Christopher Cruise.

And I'm Jim Tedder in Washington. Thank you for spending some time with us on this Thursday, the first day of August. From an historical viewpoint, this day is remembered as the birth date of Martha Burk. She was a professional gun shooter, entertainer, and close friend of cowboy Wild Bill Hickok. She was born on this day in 1903. The world knew her as Calamity Jane!

Also, Francis Scott Key was born on this date in 1779. He is famous for writing our National Anthem.

The original “dead head,” Jerry Garcia of “The Grateful Dead” was born on this date in 1942. Jerry left us in 1995, but some members of the band are still performing.

Stay with us. More Learning English programs are straight ahead, and there’s world news at the beginning of the hour, on V-O-A!