

# ALTA Stands Tall for Literacy



*ALTA student hard at work*





*An ALTA student receiving support from her tutor*

In 2017, NGC launched its Above and Beyond Programme to honour preeminent citizens of Trinidad and Tobago whose work and achievements merited recognition for their impact – whether nationally or internationally – across the fields of arts and culture, sport, business, agriculture, community and social work, education, environment and energy.

As envisioned, this initiative (then called the NGC National Heroes Project), would celebrate one honouree each cycle through a series of activities aimed at raising awareness and preserving legacies. Hasely Crawford, the country's first Olympic gold medallist, and Dr. Pat Bishop, prolific artist, intellectual and musician, were the first two heroes commemorated through this project. In the past two years, children and adults across Trinidad and Tobago were introduced to their achievements through exhibitions, performances, a graphic publication, a documentary and other media.

In 2020, NGC decided to turn the spotlight on an organisation doing exceptional work for an underserved subset of the national population. NGC is honouring the Adult Literacy Tutors Association (ALTA), a network of dedicated tutors and volunteers taking on a very pressing challenge.

### **The importance of literacy**

United Nations statistics posit that upwards of 99% of Trinbagonians aged 15 and over are literate. By dictionary definitions, that means that nearly everyone over 15 can read and write, which would be a point of pride for any nation.

Looking deeper, however, the UN defines literacy as the ability to read and write, with understanding, *a short, simple statement on one's everyday life*. By so meagre a metric, a 99% literacy rate suddenly becomes less impressive. Moreover, local surveys have confirmed there is a very different reality on the ground. Studies by both ALTA and The University of the West Indies (The UWI) in 1994 and 1995 revealed that nearly one in four persons in Trinidad and Tobago grappled with everyday reading and writing.

Literacy is a skill so fundamental to existence today that one can easily assume it is a universal ability. However, the truth is that thousands of youths and adults in Trinidad and Tobago are not literate or struggle to read and write and face unimaginable difficulties in a world dominated



*Collaboration between classmates is built into class sessions at ALTA*

by print communication. From such quotidian tasks as grocery shopping, text messaging or helping a child with homework, to matters such as securing a Driver's Permit or gainful employment – there is hardly a sphere of modern life which does not demand some measure of literacy.

In as much as it is a precursor for successful integration into society, promoting literacy can be a powerful tool for addressing social inequalities. A literate person can land better jobs, better support their children, and participate more actively and productively in society. It is therefore small wonder that the United Nations has made literacy among the targets of its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

With so many citizens struggling with reading and writing, literacy can still be considered a development hurdle for Trinidad and Tobago. If illiteracy and low literacy could be eliminated, the result would be increased stability, opportunity, and enhanced quality of life for thousands of individuals and families.

With so much on offer, the people working to ensure this need is met are delivering an important public service. When they are giving freely of their time to make it happen, they are humanitarians that deserve to be recognised as heroes. Therein lies the motivation behind NGC's decision to honour ALTA through its Above and Beyond Programme.

## ALTA

Founded in 1992 by Paula Lucie-Smith, ALTA is the only comprehensive, structured, adult literacy programme in Trinidad and Tobago. Its visionary founder saw a gap in adult education that needed to be filled. Adults with challenges in reading and writing had limited opportunities to overcome them, not least because of the judgment that would often come with admitting illiteracy.

Recognising the numbers that would benefit from a dedicated literacy programme, Mrs. Lucie-Smith set about building a network of tutors and repository of teaching materials. Since its inception, ALTA's programmes have grown in scope and reach, with classes offered at over 50 venues across Trinidad and Tobago, including prisons, and approximately 1,500 students in attendance each year. ALTA also introduced a youth literacy component to support English teaching in schools.

Setting ALTA apart is its acknowledgement of local creole dialect and how it can influence the way students learn to read and spell. ALTA has accordingly given the dialect a place in instructional material such as its spelling dictionary. Students are taught how to differentiate between standard English and the local vernacular, and the way they speak is considered when teaching spelling and grammar.





This has been recognised as a best-in-class approach to English instruction in a region with many dialects of the language, and other Caribbean islands have enlisted ALTA's support in training tutors in their own countries. In fact, such has been the impact of ALTA's work that the organisation has been recognised by UNESCO as a model for replication worldwide<sup>1</sup>. For her founding role, Mrs. Lucie-Smith was awarded the Hummingbird Medal (Gold) in 2001, and was conferred an honorary doctorate by The UWI in 2018.

NGC has supported the work of ALTA through past Deeds of Covenant and its own volunteerism programme, under the umbrella of its Corporate Social Responsibility portfolio. This relationship opened a window into the impact and relevance of ALTA's work, and at the same time, gave insight into the work still to be done – work

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ansacaribbeanawards.com/laureates/paula-lucie-smith/>

which has positive, long-term socioeconomic implications for Trinidad and Tobago. As a company which is itself heavily invested in sustainability, NGC believes that work must continue.

### The 2020 Above and Beyond Programme

This intent of this project is first and foremost to raise awareness. In previous editions, the project focused on building awareness around the life stories and achievements of two individuals to foster a deeper appreciation for their contributions to the nation.

This year, while the programme of activities will involve similar reflection on the *past* achievements of ALTA, it will simultaneously seek to raise awareness around its potential to impact the *future* of Trinidad and Tobago, if given the right support.

*Readings Under the Trees is ALTA's signature event that brings local authors and ALTA student writers together to share in the joy of reading*







*Volunteer tutors deep in discussion at ALTA's Annual Tutor Meeting*

*(Archive image)*

Several ALTA initiatives will be highlighted over the coming months, under the 2020 programme theme 'Stand Tall'.

#### *'I am ALTA Stand Tall' campaign*

ALTA's work is only as effective as its network is strong. It relies on volunteer tutors, and the participation of youth and adults who are willing to admit their struggles with reading and writing. There is still a stigma attached to literacy challenges that prevent people from seeking the help they need.

The 'I am ALTA STAND TALL' campaign seeks to combat this stigma through the testimonies of ALTA graduates which highlight the rewards to be derived from learning to read and write, and celebrate the victories already achieved. It is hoped these testimonies will help draw more volunteers and students to the cause by being a microphone for ALTA's work.

#### *Pilot of ALTA Online application*

While ALTA classes are highly accessible with venues throughout the country, many who might wish to enrol refrain from doing so due to logistics of attending or a sense of shame. To reach these individuals, ALTA has piloted an online application that will allow students to access resources and instruction from any system, for private and independent study.

#### *ALTA Spelling Instruction*

In identifying the root causes of low literacy, it is easy to see how ill-suited or inadequate learning resources can contribute to the problem. In Trinidad and Tobago, English instruction in schools tends to focus on British English standards, and often ignore the peculiarities of the local dialect that could invade the language of students and confuse spelling and writing.

ALTA's spelling dictionary is already a great endogenous resource that is used by ALTA in its classes. This year, the organisation will be extending the reach of this resource by distributing it to schools for incorporation into spelling instruction programmes. ALTA is also working on another resource to share - a phonics chart is being produced that will be distributed to schools in need, which specifically aims to help students differentiate between local and standard English when it comes to spelling.

#### **Standing tall for literacy**

For 28 years, ALTA has been giving citizens of Trinidad and Tobago a lifeline through literacy. This critical service deserves to be recognised and celebrated. NGC is proud to shine a spotlight on the heroes of ALTA - the administrators, tutors and students themselves - whose efforts are helping to raise the national standard of education, and ultimately, the quality of life enjoyed by citizens across the country.

For more information about ALTA and its programmes, visit <http://alta-tt.org/> ■