

## READING RAINBOW

### At 95, Literacy Volunteers founder Ruth Colvin continues her quest to teach the world to read

It's hard to imagine a more complete example of a life well lived than Ruth J. Colvin. Her determination to address a problem—illiteracy—right here in her own community has influenced not only the lives of countless individuals, but how reading and English are taught to adult learners worldwide. She founded Literacy Volunteers of Greater Syracuse in 1962, and in the 50 years since, Colvin's commitment to the grass-roots tutor/student model has taken her, and her husband Bob, around the world in support of literacy programs in 26 developing nations.

"I'm old, and I've been around," Colvin, now an ever-youthful 95, says with an easy laugh.

That life of adventure has cultivated an abundance of relationships and journals full of stories. Colvin has collected some of them in a new book, *Off the Beaten Path: Stories of People Around the World* (Syracuse University Press, Syracuse; 192 pages; \$24.95/hardcover). The book focuses on how the Colvins were able to connect and build mutual understanding with people of vastly different cultures through volunteerism. While Ruth pursued teaching people how to read, Bob, a former industrial chemical consultant, volunteered with the International Executive Service Corps. He often helped people address communal needs, giving practical advice for grass-roots businesses. Various church organizations and universities sponsored the couple's travels.

The Colvins spent three months of each year from 1978 to 2001 volunteering in a developing country. The last literacy-based mission was to Haiti in 2007—a rare excursion Ruth took without her beloved "partner, best friend and travel buddy." Some of the stories in *Off the Beaten Path* were published locally in the daily newspaper upon Colvin's return from these trips, and each chapter is enhanced by prints culled from her old slides. She says the process of compiling, writing, editing and selecting photos for the book took about two years.



MICHAEL DAVIS PHOTOS



"I was delighted to get these invitations to go all over the world to share what I was doing," Ruth Colvin practices golf in her Syracuse home. Earlier in the photo shoot, she and her husband Bob pointed out the many places they have traveled to teach locals both how to read and how to implement business practices.

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The book offers glimpses of the cultural immersion the Colvins partook with each journey. Colvin describes slums in India, the divisiveness of apartheid in South Africa, the denunciation of religious expression in China. "I kept detailed journals, and I always had a camera with me," she says. "I thought, I have these opportunities, but how am I going to share them? I used to do slide presentations for groups. I can't do that anymore since we stopped traveling, so I wrote them up."

It seems the Chicago-born Colvin was destined to be a globetrotter. The eldest of five children, her role as big sister was good preparation for her eventual calling. On Sunday afternoons, young Ruth Johnson would use her own inquisitiveness to inspire her siblings—devising clever activities to challenge them. One afternoon when she was 14, she told her siblings to spin the globe and point to a place, then research it. Colvin assured each that they would visit their chosen place one day. Years later, Colvin's literacy work took her to Hyderabad, India—the very spot she had pointed to on the globe. Today, a map in the couple's study is marked with all the places she and Bob have been: 62 different countries in all.

During a recent afternoon visit in their far East Side home, surrounded by items collected from their travels, Ruth Colvin says the fuel for her continuing commitment, and the link connecting all the stories in her book, are one and the same. "People all over the world have the same problems with illiteracy that we have in our communities; but they have different obstacles than we do."

Cultural norms pose barriers to education that Americans can only imagine. In Mozambique, Africa—the first foreign country where Colvin was asked by the Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church to introduce Literacy Volunteers of America's approach to teaching literacy—it was civil war. For others, it's political legacy.

"Some countries, for political reasons, actually discourage literacy," Colvin says. "In Zambia, the prison I visited, the men wanted to read, but the teacher didn't know how to teach them. In many of these countries, you are presumed guilty unless you prove your innocence. If you can't read, how can you find out your rights? That hit me a lot."

The experiences detailed in *Off the Beaten Path* show the great lengths Colvin has gone to bring literacy within the reach of as many people as possible.

Since starting LVA, Colvin has become well-versed in the reasons why it is such an important—and far-reaching—problem.

“Reading is one-to-one, because one person is important,” Colvin explains. “But it’s important to the family. It’s important to the community. It’s important to the city. It’s important to the state, because when citizens can’t read documents, they can’t do anything else. It’s important to the nation because people have to pay taxes; they have to get a job. But it’s also international. It’s a world problem. So, I was delighted to get these invitations to go all over the world to share what I was doing—hoping they could learn something from me.”

## Innocents Abroad

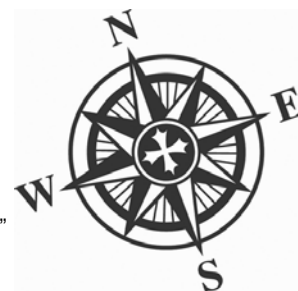
It wasn’t easy. Colvin, a devout Christian and longtime member of Pebble Hill Presbyterian Church, says among the many gifts she received from her travels included the ability to remain true to her own values without judging those who may possess very different ones.

“If so much of how we live is {determined} by how we were brought up, then you’ve got to respect that in other people,” she says. “What I’d like is for Americans to get to know and respect peoples in other cultures. I think it is so important because communication is so important. Unless you can know and understand people—whether it’s negotiating international events or meeting people one-to-one when you are traveling—you don’t realize how much we have in common.”

Colvin hopes her book can help open eyes, and hearts, and encourage others to get past their own value judgments. “You can’t have a broad sweep {of generalizations} about people. We have students from Iran here in Syracuse who are wonderful. North Korea—there are wonderful people there. We don’t have a monopoly on the good people here in America.”

Colvin also hopes her book will inspire young people who have the determination to establish connections with other cultures. She and Bob, parents of two, invited each of their six grandchildren to travel with them once they reached their 12th birthday, and those experiences influenced the path of each of their lives.

“Young people these days don’t stay put. They’re all over the country and they’re all over the world,” she says. “Parents can, early on, encourage the values of traveling not as a tourist, but with the understanding that there are people out there—people they can meet with stories of their own.”



MICHAEL DAVIS PHOTO

But meeting up remotely after a visit proved difficult because many places Colvin visited still do not have access to email. When she left, she often knew she would not be able to communicate with those people again. “The important thing to me was to share what I had. They were free to use it as they wanted.”

That well-honed sense of realism stretches back to when Colvin first learned how prevalent illiteracy was in Onondaga County. There were about 11,000 people classified at that level in 1962, according to census data. Colvin felt compelled to do something, but quickly found that compassion and motivation would not be enough.

“I wasn’t a teacher. I knew nothing,” recalls Colvin, who earned a degree in business administration from SU in 1959. “At first I used a phonetically regular program and it didn’t work because English is not phonetically regular. I finally went to Syracuse University and said, ‘I’m losing students and tutors. I must be doing something wrong.’

“I tapped the brains of top professionals. They knew I was a volunteer and were willing to help. Dr. Frank Greene opened the doors to language experience; he explained that you teach phonics only with the consonants. The vowels you teach in pattern. Comprehension is so important.”

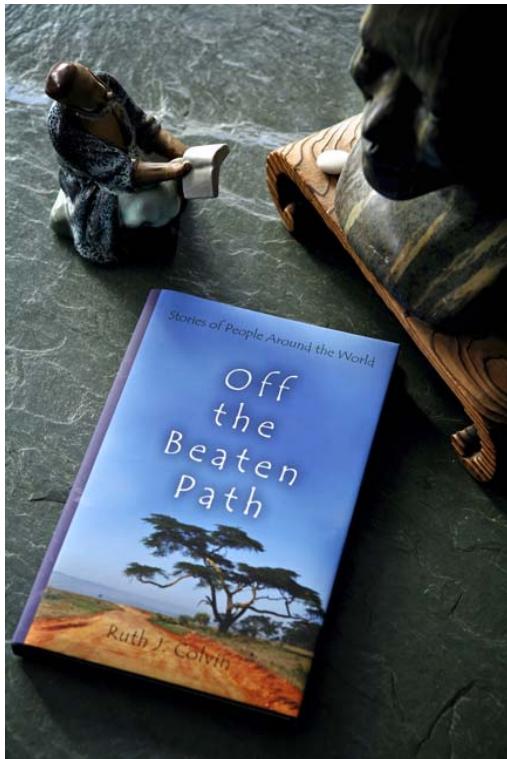
With Jane Root, Ph.D., the late reading specialist and former LVGS volunteer, Colvin wrote *Tutor*, the instructional guide for LVA tutors, now in its eighth edition. “My job is to take it out of the gobbledy-gook of the Ph.D.-speak and put it in layman’s language—to simplify it,” Colvin says. “But I couldn’t do it without the help of these top people. I can’t afford them, but they are willing to *give* their talents.”

While the need for organizations like LVA, which grew out of the Syracuse chapter in 1972, remains great, Colvin is humbled by the inroads volunteers have made. By 2002, Literacy Volunteers of American had helped hundreds of thousands of adults learn to read through 450 chapters in 40 states. That same year, the national organization merged with Laubach Literacy International to form DeWitt-based ProLiteracy (the organization will soon move to an under-renovation structure along West Street. She writes in *Off the Beaten Path* that ProLiteracy now has nearly 1,000 international affiliates.



“I was concerned about how the merger would go,” Colvin admits. “But I’ve been happy to see that the basic principals of the program have not changed. I’m on the national board, but I have nothing to do with most of what’s going on. This is a vehicle for many people to share their skills. You can’t hold it to yourself. You have to leave it open. {The volunteers} are going to make mistakes, but I made a lot of mistakes. You learn from those mistakes, and everyone adds a little bit to the program.”

Wallace Barkins, a manager at ProLiteracy who volunteered as an LVGS tutor 20 years ago and has worked closely with Colvin, says her legacy permeates every facet of the organization. And she’s still always ready to roll up her sleeves and get to work. She eagerly participates in money-raising duties for



ProLiteracy—which receives no federal funding, and is often inclined to send personal thank you notes to donors. “I think it’s the level of her commitment to the issues of literacy that is most inspiring,” Wallace says. “She remains extremely engaged. I know she still spends about three hours a day actively working on literacy issues.”

Amy Schmitz, director of communications at ProLiteracy, adds that Colvin pays particular attention to the publishing side of ProLiteracy: New Reader Press. She is currently in the process of revising LVA’s English as a Second Language tutor manual, *I Speak English*. “She’s as much a staff member as any of us.”

Marsha L. Tait, executive director of Literacy Volunteers of Greater Syracuse and a past president of Literacy Volunteers of America, says Colvin’s example has directly influenced her own 16-year commitment to literacy administration and advocacy. “Hers is just an extraordinary story,” says Tait, speaking from the chapter’s South Salina Street office. “I’ve felt privileged to get to know her and to work with her. Her energy, her enthusiasm—what can I say? She never gives up and she continues to be an inspiration to so many people.”

### The Book of Ruth

Colvin has remained an active tutor for much of LVGS’ history, and still addresses groups of new tutors as they complete their training. Tait says there are currently 165 active tutor/student pairs, and another 85 students working in small groups. The chapter also collaborates with the Syracuse Educational Opportunity Center.

Colvin is all about those personal connections and their potential domino effects. “It’s never been about just one person,” she stresses. “All these people who have volunteered with LVA saw the problem and put their input in. I’m like a mother, proud of her whole family,” she says, laughing.

Colvin received the Presidential Medal of Freedom—the highest civilian honor bestowed upon an American—from President George W. Bush in 2006, and has remained in contact with former first ladies Barbara Bush—who wrote an opening blurb for *Off the Beaten Path*—and Laura Bush. Asked what she would tell our current president if she had his ear for a day, Colvin says she would stress the importance of family literacy. Colvin points out that a child’s first teacher is often their mother. If a parent is not literate, it’s hard for the cycle of illiteracy to be broken.

“If parents are reading at a second- or third-grade level, you’ve lost the first three years during which they should be reading to their children. It’s not an either/or, it’s the adult literacy *and* the child that we have to work on,” she says. “We’ve put all of our emphasis on the children, and I’m saying we have to do as much for the adults.”

Tait shares Colvin’s position. “To me, this is the most fundamental policy issue in the United States: adults not having means to do what they need to do,” Tait says. “There is a correlation to literacy.”

Colvin has observed these connections firsthand. She recalls one student, a single mother of six whose husband had left her, but she continued to work and care for her children as best she could. When Colvin started tutoring her, she read at a second-grade level. With Colvin’s help, she was able to raise her literacy to about the fifth-grade level.

“Of those six children, three went on to college,” Colvin says proudly. “I planted the seed and she got them going. Now, she has called me and said, ‘Aunt Ruth, maybe it’s time for me to go back and get my GED.’ This is the kind of thing we work for. So, that’s why I keep going at it.”

In addition to meaningful work and a fulfilling family life, Colvin’s blessings include remarkably good health. This great-grandmother of four lifts weights every morning and frequents four exercise machines in her basement. She plays 18 holes of golf any chance she gets during the spring and summer months. “My mother used to say, ‘You’ve got to have something, even if it’s only cleaning a drawer.’ It’s about physical, mental, emotional and spiritual balance.”

While the publication of *Off the Beaten Path* caps Colvin’s days as a globetrotting ambassador, she’ll keep busy with more than housekeeping in the years to come. She, and her approach to helping adult learners, will continue to adapt with the times. Colvin smiles when she thinks back to when audiotapes and slides were common tools for LVGS tutors. “Now, people are learning in different ways, and this is good. But the volunteers amaze me the most. It shows that people are caring. People are still willing to give of their time: the one thing you can’t put a money value on.”

So while she has a stack of honorary degrees, was immortalized in the National Women’s Hall of Fame in Seneca Falls in 1993, and garnered national attention as a recipient of the highest civilian honor in the United States, Colvin says her new book is a testament to the students worldwide who are determined to acquire the ability to read, to learn—and the volunteers who work on their behalf. “All these people I’ve met. . . I call *them* heroes.”

*A launch event for Off the Beaten Path will be held at Onondaga Historical Association, 321 Montgomery St., on Thursday, March 15, 4 to 6 p.m. Colvin plans a book signing at Barnes and Noble, 3454 Erie Blvd. E., DeWitt, at 1 p.m. on April 26. The book is available for purchase at [syracuseuniversitypress.syr.edu](http://syracuseuniversitypress.syr.edu).*

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