



At 46, this Philly woman learned to read - and then published a book

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At age 46, Wanda Steward was illiterate, and much of the world was a mystery to her.

At age 47, Steward is an author whose charming children's story was read by actor Idris Elba as part of a global literacy campaign.

"It's a miracle," said Steward, of Southwest Philadelphia.

Steward always struggled in school. She tried hard, but reading did not come naturally to her. She tried to escape attention, never volunteering in class, but teachers would call on her eventually, and classmates were cruel.

"That took a toll on me — I didn't forget it," said Steward.

She showed up and did her work, typically scraping by with Ds every year — at Ferguson, McKinley, and Penn Treaty schools, and then at Kensington High. But by the time she had her first child at 18 and dropped out because she had no one to watch her baby, Steward still could not read.

Illiteracy complicated everything: How much water do you add to the mix when one of your children wants a birthday cake? What does that bill say? How much medicine do you give the child who has a fever?

"I would just put medicine in the cup, and give it to the baby and just pray that I did it right," said Steward, who has five children.

When her family was going through hard times — Steward was on welfare, the house was freezing because the heating oil had run out, and her kids were being picked on at school — she would have her children pile into bed with her. She couldn't read them stories, but she could make them up.

Enter Pong-Pong, the chicken whose continuing adventures helped her kids, and now her five grandchildren, feel a little more secure.

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I always told them, ‘Be brave — there’s adults around them they could go to, like the principal,’ ” said Steward.

Eventually, Steward participated in a welfare-to-work program, volunteering to clean Norris Square Park. That led to a job on the grounds crew of the Philadelphia Zoo, where supervisors lauded her thoroughness, and work at Destination Maternity, scanning garments, where she was fast and dependable.

Steward worked at Destination Maternity for years, but eventually, she had to take a written test about a new skill her employer wanted her to know. She tried to decode the words, but it felt impossible.

“All I could think about was, ‘I’m not getting any younger.’ I was desperate. It got to me,” said Steward.

So she asked someone: Were there programs to help someone like her? Through the city’s Office of Adult Education, she was directed to the Center for Literacy, a city nonprofit that helps residents bolster their reading skills — a whopping 40 percent of adult Philadelphians struggle with literacy. By this spring, Steward was enrolled in classes at a center close to her home, an eager pupil who never missed class.

“I’m always calling my teachers, asking, ‘Am I doing this right?’ ” Steward said.

In the meantime, Project Literacy, a global campaign to combat illiteracy by Pearson, the education company, was looking for a story to feature for International Literacy Day, celebrated in September. Candidates from around the country applied; Philadelphia’s Office of Adult Education offered Steward, whose experiences resonated.

Suddenly, Steward was turning the stories she had told her kids into *The Little Chicken Named Pong-Pong*, a children’s book that is her own retelling of the classic tale of *Chicken Little*. The book is available for electronic download, and some hard copies will soon be available after a print run.

“I can say, ‘I did that,’ ” Steward said. “Can you believe it?”

And, in a development that felt even more surreal to Steward, she FaceTimed with Elba, the acclaimed, self-taught actor who serves as Project Literacy’s campaign spokesman.

“He said he really believed in me,” said Steward. “He explained that he had problems reading, too. He said he really liked the book.”

She could not resist a personal question for Elba: Is he married?

“I said, ‘You’re such a hunk,’ ” she said, laughing. (Elba is unmarried but has a girlfriend.)

In the Project Literacy video, Elba narrates the book, then explains its origins. It was written, he said, by a woman named Wanda “who was very brave, just like Pong-Pong himself.”

As for Steward, she is still progressing as a reader, eagerly taking classes and gaining confidence.

“If I don’t know a word, I skip over it and read the next one,” she said, smiling.

Steward recently had foot surgery and is not working at the moment, but hopes to get a job when she’s healed.

She has at least one more item on her agenda, too. “Hopefully,” said Steward, “I’ll write another book.”