“We think what we’re doing is life-changing,” Steele said. “If
you don’t have the skills to engage with your family in the com-
community, in your workplace, you’re lost.”

Out of the 500 students currently enrolled at The Literacy
Center, 111 have college degrees from other countries, Steele said.
Many have doctorates, law degrees and other advanced degrees.
Yet many have had a hard time finding jobs with livable wages,
Steele said.

“We are trying to get our students to the next level — not just
in their language skills but in their migration to earning a livable
wage,” Steele said.

The Literacy Center is partnering with organizations including
SC Works to create trade pathways in industries like hospitality and
service. Steele said the center intentionally sought local employ-
ers who were known for promoting from within their companies.
Students also will be encouraged to continue their studies thanks to
tuition assistance programs at Technical College of the Lowcountry
and University of South Carolina Beaufort, Steele said.

That focus really resonates with The Literacy Center tutors
like Steven Fee. After working in an international banking career
with CitiBank and living in five countries, Fee started teaching in
North Carolina.

“I felt like I knew how hard it had been to go into a coun-
try where you didn’t speak the language, and I worked for a big
bank,” Fee said. “I had a support structure and everything, and I
thought well, I can both sympathize and empathize with people
who are doing this. I’ve been doing it since then. I think it’s
about 12 years, seven or eight of them down here in the Hilton
Head area.”

In the fall, the first class of workplace pathway students will
begin their training with local employers as partners. Students are
learning English in context to the job they are training for.

The students are excited to get into job training, but Fee said
moving from professional trades to service-driven jobs can be
challenging.

“You can see it’s hard,” Fee said. “You’ve had stature-level
jobs, and now all of a sudden you’re at the bottom of the chain at
a job that doesn’t have status.”

But learning the language helps restore some of that self-
estee, Fee said. When his students start to master English, “...they’re much more confident in using it, and therefore start to
feel part of this place and not just like hired help brought in to
just fill lower-level jobs.”

The Literacy Center always needs day and evening tutors
at their learning centers in Bluffton and on Hilton Head Island.
Typically tutors teach two days a week for two hours each class.
No prior teaching or second language skills required. For more
information call 843-815-6616 or go to theliteracycenter.org.