

Katia



a child from New York, USA

"Me first! Me first!" cried the children. You rarely see computers in this neighborhood in New York, and even less often on the street.



Katia liked it when Denis and the other volunteers brought the computer to the Street Library. All the children took turns writing on the computer.

"No, not her!" two boys shouted. "She's dumb. She can't even read the letters."

It was true that at nine years old Katia did not know the alphabet. But she was not stupid!



It was just that she had a lot of responsibilities, like shopping and helping take care of her little brother, who has asthma.

Once, during the night, when her brother was sick and was having a hard time breathing, Katia had to call a taxi to take him to the hospital.

Katia's parents, the Blakes, worked hard and were often in poor health themselves. Katia felt this and that is why she helped her parents as much as she could.

Katia had to change schools often because sometimes the family was homeless and had to live in shelters. Katia took part in some reading programs, and her older brother helped her too, but it was still hard for her to read.

Katia lives in an old building that is so crowded and noisy that it often makes people angry with each other. For Katia the hardest part is that no matter how hard her family tries to make a better life, the Blakes are always being put down by others. Nobody seems to understand them.

Once, Mrs. Blake found a job selling flowers in the street so she could buy gifts for Christmas. She had to leave home very early for this job, even before her children left for school. Mrs. Blake would be on her feet all day, and this made her sore legs hurt even more.

A while later, she found work delivering flyers to mail boxes. All that walking in the cold weather was very hard on her, but she continued. Because her mother was at work, Katia had to get the children ready for school.

Several times Katia arrived late for school. Her teacher complained to Katia's mother about it, saying she was not taking good care of Katia. Mrs. Blake stopped her job right away, so that it would no longer affect Katia's schooling. Katia was very ashamed and hurt over the whole thing.



Katia felt the same way one day when another girl said, "Your mom's a messed-up crazy!"

That was it! Katia could not take it. She started to scream so hard that she could be heard a block away. She put up her fists and not one of the volunteers at the Street Library could stop her.

Only her mother, who had heard Katia scream and came down into the street, was able to stop her from fighting.



This helped Denis to understand that Katia had too many worries and that there was too much troubling her heart; her feelings had all built up inside her.

"Katia always keeps her feelings bottled up," Denis thought. "That's probably why she has such a hard time learning."



But one thing was sure; Katia truly wanted to learn, for she never missed a Street Library.

One day at the Street Library, when there were not so many children bothering her, Katia was calm and carefully listened to a story called *Leo the Late Bloomer* (by Robert Kraus, Windmill Books, Inc., 1971).

This was a story about a baby tiger who did not know how to do anything; he did not know how to read, write, draw, eat neatly... hardly anything.

Everyone was worried about him, but the more they bothered him, the less he was able to learn.



Then there came a day when, in his own good time, Leo blossomed and learned how to do many, many things.

Katia loved that story. She asked Denis to read it to her again and again. It made her feel better because somehow she understood Leo.

The following week Katia was at the Street Library before anyone else. She wanted to read her special book, "*Leo the Late Bloomer*." She sat down with Denis and said, "Today I'll read it to you."

Then she opened the book and started: "Leo did not know how to do anything." She turned the page. "He did not know how to read...." Katia told the whole story as it was written in the book.

Katia hadn't learned to read in a week, but she had liked the story so much that she had learned it by heart. She had a friend in Leo. He helped her to believe that she could learn to read.

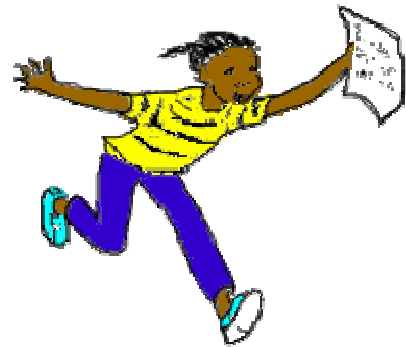
That's why, when Denis brought the computer to the street and Katia asked to write a story, he let her go first in front of all the other children.

At first the other children did not want to wait for Katia. They knew she would be slow. But after a while, they worked with the volunteers to help her find the letters she needed.



Katia was so proud when she saw the words she had typed come out of the printer.

She took the paper and ran right home to show her family.





Months later, that piece of paper was still on their wall.

It said:

"I love my mother. Katia"

Those five little words meant a lot to Katia and her family; the printout had a special place on their living room wall.

It had also come to mean a lot to Denis, who knew that those words did not tell the whole story of Katia's life.

Today, Katia is older and she knows how to read and write.

Now she reads with the other children in the Street Library. She loves to read to the little ones. They really enjoy it when she makes up stories, especially stories about Leo.

Can you imagine what kind of stories she makes up?

