

Embracing an Unexplored Doorway

Elizabeth Pumiglia

Fighting, disregarded, alone. Imagine being a single woman at the age of twenty, leaving your home, not sure whether or not your family is alive, not sure if you're going to survive, and not sure where you will be in a year, a month, or even a week. Throughout my freshmen year at Bates, but especially through my experiences tutoring African immigrants at the Adult Learning Center, I have come to realize exactly what diversity means.

The asylum seekers I have taught are a huge inspiration, a light into a different world, and an incredible learning experience for all of us. I learned just as much from the students as they learned from me. Our relationship was not one of student – teacher; we were partners embarking on a quest for new cultural knowledge and mutual understanding.

There were five women in our class; none of them had been in the United States for more than a year. They have been fighting for survival since before I was born. I have spent a majority of my life being educated; there was only one woman in the room who had been to school at all. These women fled insecure, threatening, war-ridden homes, leaving everything they knew behind in order to find a safer future. Their lives that held so much promise as they entered the “greatest country in the world” turned out to be another constant struggle. Every day, these women fight for tolerance, for money, and to learn a language that will simply help them provide for their families.

When they sat down and began to tell me in broken English about their past, their dead relatives, and their burned homes, I experienced raw emotions that I had never felt before. I felt embarrassed and unworthy. These women were all older, wiser, and more experienced than I was. They all had faced tragedies I could not. I was in that classroom because I wanted to be, because I wanted to learn about diverse cultures, and help “the less fortunate” They were there because they needed to be.

Without the Adult Learning Center these African immigrants would struggle getting a job, going to the hospital, or even reading labels in the store. It was this that set my stomach in a knot the first afternoon we all walked in to teach. The women in our class were strong, independent and resilient, with a willingness and enthusiasm to learn. They were never ashamed of their mistakes or too shy to ask questions. They were always trying to help each other understand English, even though they spoke such different languages.

When a woman from Angola was struggling with the difference between “shoe” and “foot,” a Somali woman took off her shoe put it on the table and kept saying “shoot.” Then, another Somali woman put her hand on that woman’s shoulder and with patience and kindness said “shoe” very slowly many times. There was no judgment; there was no frustration. In that moment we were not from different backgrounds, we were simply eight women, dependent on the strength and knowledge of one another.

The last day of class we were reviewing the body parts. Suddenly, a mother

of four from Somalia (I'll call her Maryan), stood up and began pointing to her body parts, listing off their English names, waiting for the class to repeat them. Then Maryan told the class the Somali word for the body part. As this dialogue continued, a woman from Angola taught the class the French word, and another woman said the Lingala word.

This whole time, we had been teaching English to African immigrants. Now they wanted to repay the favor and pass onto us knowledge of their languages, an important piece of the home that meant so much to them. This was an extremely meaningful moment for me. Not only did they feel comfortable enough to share their stories of home with us, but invited us in to witness their cultures and attempt to understand them with hands on learning.

The five women in our class served as inspirations, guides, and friends, and I hope to continue volunteering at the Adult Learning Center in the years to come. I have seen several of our students at the Trinity Jubilee Center, and downtown on Lisbon Street. They always come up to me say "hello teacher Ellie" and make a point of practicing their English with me. Even though our time together was short, we all learned something very important from that class. We all served an integral role, inspiring one another, opening up, and becoming some of the first doorways into brand new worlds.

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