

## Learning Through Teaching: Volunteering at The Adult Learning Center

Lisa Slivken

*“Close the closet.”* One student, Jihan, starts laughing as she reads the post-it note taped to the classroom door. She realizes that despite their different pronunciations, the two words appear nearly identical. As the class period continues, the confusion only multiplies.

*“Clothes are in the closet.”* Dani, the head teacher, turns to me with a puzzled glance, struggling to describe to the students how “clothes” is pronounced differently from “close,” as in “to close a door.” I repeat the words aloud to myself, unable to determine whether I draw a distinction between them in my own speech.

The room fills with laughter as all of us - students, teachers, and volunteers alike - share in a moment of collective confusion, unable to sort through the complications of the English language. When we move away from household terms and begin practicing directions and prepositional phrases, Dani writes on the board to introduce a reading exercise. “Fatima is next to Asha. Fatima is far from Jihan. Asha is close to Hawa.” Dani slowly lifts her marker and lightheartedly whispers an expletive, realizing she has just introduced yet another form of the word “close.” She turns to me and says “Oh no, not another one. We have to use ‘near’ instead.”

With each class period I spent at the Adult Learning Center, my admiration of this remarkable group of African immigrant women grew and grew. I was constantly amazed by the vibrancy, creativity, and senses of humor the students brought to the classroom despite the innumerable difficulties facing them within the classroom environment and outside of it.

The students are extremely focused and determined to learn, though there are times when the external burdens they face inevitably seep into the space of classroom. Last week, Hawa came in late, motioning to her throat with a pained look on her face. When Dani asked her questions out of concern, she just kept turning her palms upward and looking at the ceiling, as if to indicate that there was no point in discussing her sickness - her health was in God’s hands. Another day, when Asha, one of the most advanced and eager students in the class, put her head on the desk and slept through most of the lesson, Dani made a gentle effort to invite her to participate, but then resolved to let her rest.

Despite the nearly tangible presence of the hardships that follow many African immigrant women throughout their daily lives in Lewiston, pain and fatigue are by no means the dominating narrative of this space. The classroom is usually bursting with laughter, friendliness, and positive energy. When I leave at

10:30 on Thursday mornings, I do so full of joy and appreciation for the small moments of connection I have forged with the African immigrants around me, and in awe of how those who have suffered so greatly retain so much warmth, positivity, and eagerness to learn.

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