

More than Volunteering: Creating Community at the Lewiston Adult Learning Center

By Sarah Freyd

On a sunny Wednesday afternoon, my classmate Ayesha and I walked into the Lewiston Adult Learning Center with no idea what we were in for. We were excited, but scared for our first day. Around the classroom table sat 5 eager students, pen and paper in hand, looking at us, ready to learn. Just like that, I was transformed from a college student into a teacher.

As time passed, Ayesha and I became aware of the various levels of English speakers that made up the class. I was surprised when a few of the students had trouble having a conversation past “Hello” and “How are you.” I put myself in my students’ shoes, and while I realized that my job was hard, their job, the grueling task of learning to live in America, was infinitely harder than I could *ever* imagine. Suddenly, my volunteer teaching became a whole lot more meaningful than just “social justice work.” I realized my obligation, as an American, to openly welcome those who are new to this place, and to do everything I can so they feel part of this community.

When planning our next class, I found myself tracing the steps of African immigrants in their everyday lives here in Lewiston. I thought a lot about what they need to do in order to support themselves and their families. To make appointments and meet deadlines, they need to tell time. To get food, they have to know how to say, “Where are the apples?” If they receive social services, they need to know their date of birth, address, and phone number.

There is this popular idea that when immigrants come to the United States, it will be easy for them to access all the resources they need to live their lives as they want, since America is the “land of opportunity.” But many soon learn that as black, African, non-English speaking, economically disadvantaged refugees, life in America is a lot more challenging than that. I could not help but wonder if my students felt this way, too.

Despite gaining a better understanding of the harsh realities of being an African immigrant in Lewiston, I always found myself smiling during our of class, and so were our students. Though there were frustrating times, like when the students struggled with saying the word “thirty,” they made more progress than I could ever have imagined. One student, a Congolese man I will call Joseph, was shy and much younger than the other students. For the first few lessons, he looked down most of the time and spoke less than anyone else. When students shared their birthdays, they laughed at the fact that he was born in 1992. They also didn’t include him in many of their personal conversations in French.

After a few classes, Joseph held his head up and talked more - in full sentences even, - which was rare for most of the students. In the beginning, I felt a fairly strong disconnect between myself and the students, especially with Joseph and another student from Angola I will call Christophe, who spoke the least amount of English in the class. By the end of the month, we were laughing and joking together. We reminded Christophe to speak English with his daughters, and we laughed about how they should practice pronouncing “thirty” when they are driving. Looking back now that it’s over, it’s amazing to think that so much happened in just a few class meetings. And most importantly, I didn’t feel so distant from them anymore.

Before teaching at the Adult Learning Center, I had never worked with immigrants, let alone cared about the issue that much. I vaguely knew about the arrival of African refugees and asylum seekers in Lewiston, but as a Bates student, I was out of touch, like many. During my college decision-making process, many people told me that Lewiston is a bad town with a lot of problems. I now realize that these “problems” are greatly exaggerated. Immigrants do present a challenge to their new communities, but they are more than just “problems,” much more. They offer unique opportunities for friendship, understanding, learning, and acceptance of diversity.

Teaching English to a class of five African students has shown me first-hand that refugees are real people with real stories, real voices, and real lives. This is a lesson that we can all take to heart.

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