

## Teaching and Learning with African Immigrants

By Charlotte Cutshall

The first day of class I was feeling unsure of myself, but I knew that teaching English to African immigrants at the Adult Learning Center would be a learning experience for both the students and myself. The first class was a challenge, as I did not know the students' names, skill level, or even how to teach a class on any subject. I am a shy person by nature, and, through tutoring I found that shyness is counterproductive. I had to force myself to be confident, assertive, and clear with the students in order to get my point across. After realizing that my passiveness was a problem, my teaching became much more successful.

Over the course of a few weeks, I discovered specific tools, like repetition, can be very useful when teaching. We returned to the same topics many times over the course of a session. One day we started class by asking, "What day is it?" The students replied, "Today is..." Then we asked, "What time is it?" "The time is..." Over the course of the class, we would periodically ask, "What day is it?" or "What time is it?" to reinforce these concepts. Another tool that was very helpful was my basic knowledge of French. I was gradually able to understand how much French to use in order to help clarify concepts, yet still allow the students to learn.

Once I became aware of what worked well and what didn't, and once I learned the student's names and their abilities, a bond began to form between us. At this point, tutoring began to feel very comfortable. I began to feel as though I had some kind of relationship with these immigrants from Africa, with my students, even though I could barely speak to them. I found myself feeling sad for the students when they struggled over and over again with the pronunciation of the letter "A" versus the letter "I." At the same time, I found myself feeling warm inside when a student flawlessly told me their address without hesitation. I felt very proud.

I will miss tutoring at the Adult Learning Center. This was an experience unlike anything I have done before. It was quite possibly the most rewarding experience of my life. My time at the Adult Learning Center was spent doing nothing more and nothing less than helping others. Every time class ended a man I'll call Patricio, who recently came to Lewiston from Angola, would light up with joy and say, with some

struggle, “Thank you teacher! Great teaching! Have a great day!” He would often forget how to say “teacher” or “teaching,” but he would get there, because he wanted more than anything to get this point across. One day, as a man I’ll call Edgar went through this routine, I realized something. We really were *teaching* him. We weren’t just going to the Center, speaking with these people a bit, and hoping we were helping them with their English. We were *really* making a difference.

I am so proud to have helped these African immigrants, who came to America for a better life and who struggle to get by in this country due to a lack of knowledge of something as basic as the English language.

I am so grateful for this experience.

Charlotte Cutshall is from Falmouth, Maine. She is a rising junior at Bates College and will be studying abroad in Florence, Italy next fall. Charlotte is a member of the track and field team and is majoring in anthropology.

*This essay was originally published on July 10, 2016 in the Lewiston Sun-Journal (Lewiston, Maine).*