

English class unit on healthcare maps immigrants' road to self-reliance

What is striking to a visitor of the Jamaica Plain Community Centers Adult Learning Program's Level 4 class is how imperceptible the boundary is between real life and this classroom on the 4th floor of English High School.

At 6 p.m., when students walk into class, they don't check the day's challenges at the door and switch gears to "academics." On the contrary, their teacher's expectation is that students bring their struggles and confusions into the classroom. In fact those issues become the class curriculum.

Students came to class with stories that showed how ill-equipped they were to find their way through the complicated maze of the healthcare system.

In Fall 2006, several of Marianna Geraskina's students came to class with stories that showed how ill-equipped they were to navigate the complicated healthcare maze.

When Orbelina Sanchez' son needed surgery to address a high blood pressure condition, she found herself unable to advocate for him. She didn't know the system and could not speak the language.

Nazmi Rama needed surgery for a work-related accident and had to ask his daughter to schedule appointments and help communicate with doctors and nurses.

Fatima Camara had no idea she qualified for the Massachusetts Uncompensated Care Pool and ignored applications that came in the mail because she could not read them.

Marianna developed a unit on health that integrated every day healthcare issues with grammar, syntax, and tenses. In the course of several class sessions, students practiced conversations that might take place at a doctor's appointment, read typical health coverage plans and

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photo by Kensuke Sato

They told me, 'We can't do anything, because you don't have insurance to cover your son.' My son (was) going to die because he doesn't have insurance? He's very young.

-Orbelina Sanchez, Student



photo by Ishita Gupta

It was very important for Orbelina to know her rights. Because certainly, her son could have Free Care. And it was not necessary for her to go through so many days and worries to get what she should have gotten. It happened before, but now, it wouldn't have happened because now she knows the rules.

-Marianna Geraskina, Teacher

Jamaica Plain Community Centers, Inc. Adult Learning Program

The Adult Learning Program of Jamaica Plain Community Centers is dedicated to the empowerment of adults in advocating for themselves, their families and their communities through the provision of free basic education, ESOL and high school diploma programs.

The ALP offers 4 levels of morning ESOL classes and 6 levels of evening classes.

- 258 students served in ESOL classes in FY 2006
- 434 students currently on the waiting list

Other ALP services:

- Tutoring
- Computer Literacy
- Citizenship
- Employability
- Individualized counseling on social, medical, economic and legal concerns
- Self-advocacy workshops

Contact The Adult Learning Program

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The purpose of education is not only to teach people specific language skills, but to empower them to make positive change in their lives and their communities. To make this happen, instruction needs to be coming from their authentic experience in their lives or connected to their experience in their lives.

-Lee Haller, ALP director



photo by Venera Bekteshi

When they sent the application to me, I didn't know what to do with it, and I always threw it away.

-Fatima Camara, Student



photo by Ishita Gupta

Sometimes I have my 13-year-old daughter call, but yesterday I called myself because my daughter was at school. I said if you speak slowly I will be able to understand and I understood everything.

-Nazmi Rama, Student

learned how to apply for them, and became familiar with insurance concepts such as “eligibility” and “poverty guidelines.” In pairs, they also practiced conducting and responding to an allergy survey.

Students' enthusiasm for the topic and the unit's relevance to their daily lives led to improvements in their English skills. The complicated healthcare system no longer seems impenetrable and they have begun to rely more on themselves.

Enhanced self-sufficiency motivates students to continue attending classes even after long days at work. “At times I'm tired but I still come because I know I will learn more,” says Fatima. She now completes all her healthcare applications on her own, and even helps family members who solicit her help.

Nazmi Rama and Martha Ochoa now depend less on their children, and Orbelina learned that she qualified for

healthcare coverage through the Uncompensated Care Pool.

Health care is not the only topic discussed in Marianna's class. Responding to students' needs, this dedicated teacher covers other issues including raising

teenage children in the U.S. and American history.

Marianna uses real-life materials when covering class topics, including newspapers, insurance plans, magazines, books, restaurant menus, warning signs, financial aid applications, report cards, classified ads, and more.

She also relies on the Internet, and encourages students to go to the computer during class when they need an answer.

Most importantly, Marianna encourages her students to keep telling their stories: “How you learn to speak is by telling personal stories. We found amazing things that we didn't expect,” said Marianna.

I don't feel good when I depend on my son. When you come here, it's a new experience; it's very hard. When you have a chance to take the English class, you can see the progress. My son said to me, 'Mommy, you don't need me anymore.' I was so sad, but he said, 'Mommy, I feel proud about you.'

-Martha Ochoa, student

English for New Bostonians (ENB) is a public-private-community solution initiated by the Mayor's Office of New Bostonians committed to expanding the city's long-term capacity to meet the demand for English classes. ENB increases seats in ESOL programs across the city, supports innovation in the field to reach learners at home and at work, and helps to heighten awareness about immigrant and language issues among the public, businesses, funders and all levels of government.

Learn more about ENB:

Mayor's Office of New Bostonians: 617-635-2980, cheng.tam@cityofboston.gov

Boston Adult Literacy Fund: 617-482-3336, balf@balf.net

Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition: 617-350-5480 x 203, cgreen@miracoalition.org