

New Neighbors Newsletter

Spring 2020. A newsletter by and for our students.

Adjusting to the Changes, by Director Lizzie Liu

Spring 2020 has been quite a journey, not only for our students, but also for all of us around the globe. Due to the threat of COVID-19, New Neighbors ELL had to suspend in-person classes in mid-March to ensure our students' safety. Although we cannot meet in-person anymore, our teachers are committed to helping our students carry on their learning experiences. The care and love shown for the students was overwhelming. Teachers gathered together virtually to learn how to use the Zoom application, which would allow the students to attend classes virtually. Then, each class chose a convenient time and continued their study of English on line. As the director of New Neighbors ELL, I see how difficult it is for the students to navigate the challenges they now have to face. The fear of COVID-19, unemployment, childcare, homeschooling kids, lack of adequate medical insurance, etc. The list goes on and on. But, I also see their resilience. One teacher made a comment which still resonates with me. "I tend to think that immigrants are probably stronger than the rest of us." Yes. It takes a lot of strength for our students to move to a new culture and perfect a new language. But, this Spring, they have proven they all have the strength they need! New Neighbors ELL is proud to be on the journey with them.

In this newsletter, our students talk about their stories in coming to America. Some shared with us what has surprised them the most, some described how their perspective has changed because of moving here. It is heartwarming to read these stories. And, I, indeed all of us, cannot wait to see their lovely faces when it is safe for us to meet again.



Adjusting to a USA Winter, by Maria Camilla Moran, Level 7

My life has been divided into seasons since I came to the United States. I used to know only one season in my life, summer. It was my only season for 23 years.

Winter is a season that I started to enjoy when I changed my attitude. I remember when I came a year and a half ago. I felt the cold weather come into my skin and touch my brain, bringing such sadness. Although I hated the weather, I started to walk around Old Town almost every day after 5 p.m. when I finished my work. I told myself, "Don't let this weather enclose you." I remember the smell of the bread from the Subway on King Street, which always made my days happier. I don't like the smell of the deodorant I used to love in Colombia, because it reminds me of my weakness and sad moments at the beginning in the US.

When summer arrived, I felt like I was living a dream. Finally, my season had come, and I could go around with my bike, breathing well and my hands were no longer frozen. I could jog around the waterfront. I lost weight easily, and I didn't feel the need to eat because of my anxiety or the cold feeling that winter brings to my tummy.

Surprisingly, at the end of summer, I was missing my winter. I realized that I could enjoy winter in my life. I find some similarities between winter and sad moments. The kinds of things that I used to reject in my life, I now accept and enjoy.





Coming to America, by Level 5

Coming to America was the dream of many of the Level 5 students! Arriving at the airport, the green trees and beautiful flowers, and clean fresh air was a very welcome start to their new life in America for many who had left behind countries in conflict. They feel safe and comfortable in their daily lives and out in public.

Students commented that Americans “are honest and friendly.” They remarked that “Strangers smile at you on the streets, and they hold the door open for you!” They enjoy living in the Washington, DC area, visiting the monuments and museums, and seeing the Christmas decorations.

But they also spoke of painful periods of isolation and the difficulties of adjusting to a new country. Many of them spent months alone at home or with their children. They have found the ELL program and the teachers to be very helpful in learning English to overcome their shyness and to help them integrate into their neighborhoods and community. They did experience some culture shocks. They were surprised by skimpy clothing choices and open displays of affection. They noted that men and women often paid their own way in restaurants, unlike in their home countries. Many thought this is a good practice. But they also want their children to maintain many of their cultural and religious traditions.

The Level 5 students all have high hopes and many dreams for their futures and for their children’s futures. Some want to travel and see more of the United States. Many have dreams of attending university for degrees in nursing, business, and information technology. They want to work and earn a living. For all of them, nothing is impossible in America!

**Watch for registration details
later this summer!**

Adjusting, by Julie Kehrli, Intro 1A teacher

In a beginning level class, it is difficult to obtain firsthand accounts of students' journeys to the United States or of the challenges facing them now. But as I look around the classroom during the first week, the faces of my students tell me everything I need to know.

I am struck by the courage and determination our students must summon to come to their first English language learning class. They are in a new country. They do not understand the language. The majority of the population does not look, act or sound like they do.

Many of my students look at me shyly, some expectantly, and all hopefully. They come to class because they want to learn English in order to better function in their new home. But they also come seeking a warm face and a friendly smile from those who would teach them. Many are searching for a gentle, guiding hand to usher them into a new culture – to ease their passage into an often strange and foreign land. They want and need to feel like they belong.

Fulfilling that need is, I believe, one of the most crucial aspects of teaching beginning level students. Building community in the classroom is so very important. A feeling of community, of belonging, is essential to their gaining the confidence they need to develop the skills necessary to thrive in their new home.

We spend a fair amount of time in beginning English classes on so-called “survival English” skills. And I am always pleased when new students master the alphabet, numbers, rudimentary vocabulary, and the ability to write and recite their full addresses. But I am happiest when I watch them blossom during their weeks and months in class as they come to understand that we are glad they are here – that we welcome their presence.

Only then can they truly relax and concentrate on why they came here – to learn English!

Meet Introductory Level A-2, by Laurie Tracy, Level A-2 teacher

Introductory Level A-2 has 12 students from six countries. English is our common language.

In the current term, we are working on the alphabet, numbers, personal information, health, weather, clothes and colors.

Dog Parks!, by *Danuta Pawinska-Nowak, Level 7*

When I came to the U.S., I was surprised by how happy, polite and always smiling the dogs were as they were walked in my neighborhood. They were always on leashes, never attacked anyone, and never argued with other dogs. It also surprised me that all of the owners cleaned up after their puppies...almost all of them.

The other day, I was very surprised to discover a playground for dogs. It was an amazing place. I'd never seen something like that before. It was a big, fenced space with artificial grass covering the ground.

It was easy to clean and safe with easy access to drinking water. For people, there were a couple of benches. What was most important to me, there were a lot of dogs playing on the ground. Wow, there were so many of them in different sizes and with different personalities. Some of them were shy, and some of them never stopped playing and running. My husband and I walk there from time to time to observe the dogs, always with joy and pleasure.

After that, when I found a day care place for dogs in our neighborhood, I wasn't surprised. I thought what a great idea it was to keep dogs happy and safe.

Welcome to the USA, by *Level One students*

WE ARE LEVEL ONE! There are fourteen of us and we come from Afghanistan, Colombia, Egypt and Guatemala. Some of us have been here for three years. Others have just arrived three months ago. We miss our home country, especially our families, friends and food. We also miss our clothes, our gardens, our former students, our religious celebrations, and our houses. BUT we have discovered new things in the USA. We were surprised by the big buildings, the buses, the supermarkets, and the parks. Here everyone arrives on time, the internet is very fast, the seasons change, houses are made of wood not concrete, and women can study and drive. Although costs are high and we would want to have computer classes, we really like the order and security, the good schools for our children, and the quiet.

OUR BIG PROBLEM: We have to learn English and that is difficult, but we are trying to learn and we will do it!

**We can't wait to see
you all Fall 2020!**

Istanbul to England to the USA, by *Sermin Ciddi, former student, Level 7*

Before we settled in England I had participated in a six-month intensive English course in my former hometown of Istanbul, so I thought I would be able to understand what people said be understood by them when I went to England. However, the first day I realized that people on the street were speaking very differently from the books! I didn't wait any longer, and immediately joined a class that was meant to help English people improve their communication skills and find a better job. Both these classes were five days a week for six months. I improved my writing, reading and speaking in English. I built up my self-confidence.

I then went back to Turkey and after many years, I decided to move to the US. This time I needed to brush up my English and adjust my UK English to US English. Meanwhile, I made funny mistakes and people didn't understand me! Some examples of these include using UK English words instead of American English words: telly (TV), flat (condominium, apartment) and jumper (sweater).

To help improve, I decided to join to an English class at New Neighbors. I was accepted for level 7 and attended for two years. This fantastic class, my great teachers, and my lovely classmates helped me a lot with my English. Additionally, as an artist, I have a studio at the Torpedo Factory in Alexandria. There, I have many opportunities to practice my English with my artist friends and people who come in to my studio!

In the summer of 2019, a group of New Neighbors students and graduates created a group called "Conversation Club." We meet once a week to practice our English conversation. Thank you so much to our stupendous teachers Sara and John! They help by choosing amazing articles, help us practice our spoken English, and most importantly spend time with us. Conversation Club has been unforgettable!



Initiated by interested alumni, Level 7 teachers John Lennon and Sara Dougherty-Jones began offering a school wide advanced Conversation Club once a week after regularly-held classes. Here, John is leading a discussion about "soft skills" in the workplace.

Be Thankful, by Pablo Lemus, Level 7

Being thankful for what I have, Or what I receive from others, Is a part of my happy life.

In my opinion, we need to be thankful. My life could be harder if I didn't have Family and friends around me.

When I take a moment to remember Where I have come from until now, A lot of friends come in memories.

So, even if I don't see them anymore I hope those people have been enjoying A good life, good health, and hopefully I can see them again.

So, everything I received in the past I am thankful for, and now I feel gratitude For being part of this beautiful group. We Always help each other.

Even when we Have a debate, we are still having a great time. I also appreciate the time and dedication They give us in this School.

Of course, I am writing about our Teachers. Without their support and volunteer Time, we wouldn't be able to take these beautiful classes.

Thank you very much for everything you Have been doing and for being our teachers, Our friends, and our family.

Thanks again.



*Author Margery Leveen Sher (center front) visited Level 7 to discuss her new book, **Indomitable! Immigrants' Stories of Perseverance and Resilience**. In it, she summarizes interviews with 32 area immigrants who came to the US for safety, love, or opportunity.*



Level 6 celebrates the holidays in style, mixing the many traditions celebrated by our diverse student body!



Level 5 Students tour the Alexandria Public Library.

Things That Have Surprised Us About America, by Level 6 students

This year, our 17 Level 6 students come from 11 different countries discussed in small groups some of the things that surprised them about life in America.

Dragana from Serbia—The USA is a land of opportunity. Seldom anywhere in the world do you have a country where you can find a job in a few months with a poor knowledge of the language and earn a salary.

Begona from Spain—When I came to the USA, I was very surprised when people were wearing sport clothes, even if they weren't playing sports, especially during the weekends.

Hanna from Ethiopia—The first time in the United States when I saw the snow, I was so surprised and it was so beautiful.

Lina from Colombia—The most surprising thing in the USA is the young people, who are more free than in Colombia. When they go to the university, they are becoming independent people – they get work, pay rent and buy groceries with their own money.

Yura from Ukraine—I think there is a lot of pressure from the government with excess taxes, laws and regulations, and that people all the time ask themselves about the possibility to do some things without breaking the law.

Nadia from Eritrea—I like that the American people have smiles on their faces everywhere. They smile to everyone.

Nurzham from Kazakhstan— One day, I visited the market and the cashier said, I like your sweater. It was so weird because you cannot say that in my country. In Kazakhstan, you cannot praise and it is not well regarded to receive and give compliments from a person that you don't know.

Wiliam from Guatemala—When I came to this country, I was surprised to see the squirrels walking in the streets. They are not very scared compared to that of my country.

Fabiana from Brazil—Traffic signal red or green? Pass or not pass? In the U.S. it is a law not to cross if the traffic light is red for the pedestrians (even if no car is coming). In my country it is not so strict and people usually cross when a car is not coming.

Fatma from Eritrea—Americans are some of the only people who use an excess of ice in their drinks. In other parts of the world, you rarely see people use ice in their drinks.

Fabiana from Brazil—Why do Americans use so much ice in their drinks? Maybe it is a more mentality. Maybe giving customers lots of ice is seen as adding rather than subtracting value.

Walter from Guatemala—When I came to the U.S., I was surprised to see people taking their dogs to school training and that people allowed dogs to live inside of the house.

Arnoldo from El Salvador—When I moved here, I noticed how different people treat dogs here. Here in the U. S. dogs are loved and respected. But, not always. My daughter and I passed a pet store one day that had dogs up for adoption. We found a dog named Hebe. He was abused by his old owners. We got because we saw something special in him and we were right.



What We Wish For, by *Level 4 students.*

When learning to express dreams and regrets using the pattern, I wish . . ., Level 4 put together the following “wish list.” They also agreed that being in the United States makes wishes more possible and each of them intend to work hard to fulfil their wishes.

I wish I could fly an airplane, I wish I could travel at Christmas, I wish I could travel to the moon!, I wish I could visit my family, I wish I could study to be a nurse, I wish I could speak English better, I wish I could work less, I wish I could get my driver’s license soon, I wish I could go back to Ethiopia soon, I wish I could learn to drive the car, I wish I could get citizenship soon, I wish I could travel around the world, I wish I could get a better job, I wish I could return to my country for a visit, I wish I could take the TOFEL, I wish I could buy a house, I wish I could visit Miami.



Tsige Gamie, from Ethiopia shares traditional tea with Level 4 classmates at the class holiday party.

The Bridge of Friendship by *Joby Dupuis, level 4 teacher and newsletter editor.*

Adjusting to a new culture and a new language is made incredibly easier if you make even one friend in your new country. Twice, I have moved to a new culture and twice my friendship with a native made my adjustment so much easier. In Spain, although my academic Spanish was fair, speaking to native speakers was very scary! And, adjusting to the new culture was challenging! However, once I met Carmen, things were much easier. Carmen does not speak English but that didn’t seem to matter. My beginning Spanish was enough and we laughed when it wasn’t. She took me to the market, we walked along the beach, we laughed about the differences in our cultures. Carmen told me where to find the best meat, where to get my hair cut, how to bargain at the market and when not too. My experience in Spain was so much easier because of her friendship. Twenty five years later, I still consider Carmen one of my closest friends.

In Italy, my neighbor, who was 20 years older than me, was also new to our town. I often waved or nodded when I saw her. One day she invited me over for tea. We could only gesture because I spoke only a few words of Italian and she spoke no English. We sat and talked over our cups of tea as though we could understand every word, gesturing, laughing, and smiling. Despite the language barrier we had tea together often. Concetta invited me to the market, to dinner and to family celebrations. Each experience taught me about Italian culture and provided practice for my slowly growing Italian language skills. Over the weeks and months that followed, I began to hear Concetta’s words as words and not just sounds. Finally, I understood her sentences! I valued her friendship greatly!

Teachers at New Neighbors encourage our students to make American friends. We know it is easier to find friends in the immigrant communities where they live. But friendship with Americans opens doors that no other friendships can. There is no better way to master English or understand American culture than to have American friends. Don’t let a language barrier prevent a friendship from forming. Overcoming the challenge of cross lingual, cross cultural friendships is well worth the effort. If you are reading this article as an American, reach out to these newest members of the American community. If you are a student reading this article, don’t let fear of the unknown stop you. Wave, nod, say “Good morning”, share a cup of tea. Build the bridge of friendship!