This Year’s Theme: Where I’m From

Campagna Center’s New Neighbors program brings together people from all areas of the world and all walks of life. Every spring, we ask our students and teachers to participate in a creative activity in order to share an element of their cultural backgrounds and personal journeys to illustrate the wonderful diversity of experiences every individual brings to our community.

This year, inspired by the poem "Where I’m From" by George Ella Lyon, we encouraged our classes to reflect on the people, places, and events that have shaped who each of us are today, and who we are becoming.

For me, becoming isn't about arriving somewhere or achieving a certain aim. I see it instead as forward motion, a means of evolving, a way to reach continuously toward a better self. The journey doesn't end.”

MICHELLE OBAMA, “BECOMING”
Rather that use this space to reflect back upon our exciting year for the New Neighbors program, full of new faces and opportunities to connect across the Alexandria community, I thought I would take our creative assignment to heart and provide a poem that personifies our program. I believe it encapsulates the strengths of our community and what makes us unique, whether it is our dedicated students and teachers who come to class or the impactful interactions that happen every day. I hope you enjoy all the lovely voices of our students, staff and teachers in the following pages as they share where they are from and where they are going.

With gratitude,
Katrina

Where the New Neighbors Program Is From
by Katrina Foelsche
Director, Youth Literacy & Adult Language Programs

We are born from hearts of kindness, over 23 years
Of dedication and determination and never-wavering support.
We are of combined days and years and decades of commitment,
Our teachers giving of their hands, their ears, their eyes
and with those...

We are seen. We are heard. We are held.
We are from the delights of new discoveries and a desire to learn.
We are of lives transformed in the littlest moments...
Experiences shared, stories told, puzzles solved,
Faces lighting up, eyebrows scrunching.
Friendships blooming.

We are all the senses alive...
The tastes of our stew of Columbian Ajiaco, Ethiopian Doro Wot,
Kabuli and Rosh
The feel of a book’s pages as you flip,
The smells steaming up from a tagine,
The beat of our choruses, the scratches of our pencils.

We are New Neighbors.

Where I’m From: Motherhood
by Dina Hammoude
Program Manager

I am from the joy of three little ones,
Their laughter brightening each day,
In their love, I find my way.

I am from the endless questions,
And the wonder in their eyes,
I am from the gentle guidance,
As they learn to reach for the skies.

I am from the late-night stories,
And the early morning chatter,
I am from the pride and worries,
Of being their mom, nothing else matters.

Where I’m From: Lizards and Dogs
by Jaci Fernandez
Program Assistant

I am born in early morning birthday celebrations
And opening presents at midnight on Christmas
I am from dog walks and dog parks
To dressing up my lizard for Halloween

I am from moments captured on disposable cameras and bulky camcorders
To moments stored away in cardboard boxes
The Classroom is a Vessel and We Chart the Course by our In-Person Introduction Class students & teachers

One of us knows the land of the Quiche Mayan, their colorful handmade clothing, their easy smile and the time made for strangers.

One of us knows the vast mountain landscapes and rich language traditions of Afghanistan.

One of us knows the green mountains, lively music, and delicious street food of Colombia.

One of us has lived many places but has put down roots nowhere.

In class, we come together with common purpose and open hearts and a harmony of understanding is achieved.
Bibi, Level 1

I am from mountains and greenery
I am from friendly people
I am from fresh bread & kabobs
I am from Eid Celebration

Tahani, Level 1

I am from Libya
We have a big, beautiful, blue sea.
I eat my family cooking,
I hear quiet music
I smell fresh air.
I am a family to celebrate.

Atifa, Level 1

I am from mountains and rivers, mountain views
Mountains and greenery,
Mountains and friendly people

I am from delicious fish and fresh bread, kabobs and flowers...

In the morning there is the sound of prayers and the crowing of roosters
and the city is very noisy.

I am from when you get up in the morning, the voice of an old man
comes to buy fresh cheese.
Khatera, Level 1

I am from fresh bread, kabobs, and flowers.
I am from mountains and rivers, mountain views.
I am from call to prayer and bird calls.
I am from cooking roasted chicken.

Alicia, Level 1

I am from delicious fish.
I am from mountains and rivers.
I am from mountains and friendly people.
I am from chickens singing at 5:30 am,
ice cream man
I am from flowers, basil, and rosemary.
I am from roasted chicken.
What I Miss About My Country
By Students in our In-Person Level 2 Class

*I’m from Belarus. I miss my home country because of the familiar farms, nature parks, lakes and forest there. I also miss the culture and warmth of the people; the sense of belonging I feel there.

* I’m from El Salvador. When I lived there, I liked to go to the beach. I also miss Terry, my favorite dog.

* I’m from Guatemala. I miss my family. I miss going to the beach with white sand and palm trees. My father would take us there.

* I’m from El Salvador. I liked the beaches. I miss my six cats and one dog and my family – father, mother, uncles and aunt and cousins. I also miss the fresh fish that we would buy at the beach, especially the lobster!

* I’m from Ethiopia. I love my country. I miss my family and friends. I miss my church that I used to attend with my family.

* I’m from Afghanistan. I do not miss the country. It is definitely not a good country but I do miss my mother. We had 45 years of war. Many explosions. The country is not good for girls. Sometimes my school would close for long periods.

* I’m from Morocco. I miss my family and friends. I miss the food. I loved to travel the country. I really liked to visit the Atlas Mountains and the sandy beaches. There are good beaches for swimming. I loved to visit my grandfather’s farm. He raised dairy cattle – for milk, butter and eggs. He also had an olive grove.

* I am from Venezuela. I feel very proud to have been born there, and at the same time, sad about the situation in my country. I miss my family and friends and gatherings. Although I miss them a lot...I feel lucky to have immigrated to Peru and then the USA. It has taught me about myself because I am capable of many things. I have grown up in many aspects. I’m very independent now!

* We are from Turkey and we were living in Istanbul. We miss Istanbul and our friends. Kadikoy is the district where we lived. It is perhaps the most beautiful district of Istanbul, with narrow streets, and shops everywhere, you can find whatever you want.
We are from our parents, from Mama and Papa, from our sisters, brothers, teachers, girlfriends, cousins, and nephews.

We are from the sound of the children playing at elementary school, the smell of bergamot tea and fresh tomatoes, the taste of mesre wet* mama made for me a lot and varynyky* with cherry, made by great-grandmother at home in June, when the cherries ripened in our garden.

We are from walking and running and riding bikes, playing, listening to music, and reading.

We are from cartoons on TV, Nancy Drew, and The Diary of Anne Frank.

We are from Afghanistan, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Turkey, Ukraine, and the US.

We are of America.

* NOTES:

Mesre wet is an Ethiopian dish made with lentils and carrot. You may also see it spelled misir wot in English. Varynyky is a Ukrainian dish similar to dumplings. You may be more familiar with it as pierogi, its Polish name.
Rehana, Level 3

I want to read many books. This is my first wish. I need more English for my citizenship. My second wish is to have a new car. I want a car for my daily routine. I hopefully will have a big house for my future. I need a big house because I have four children. This is my wish.

Raphael, Level 3

Housework and cooking take time. Good advice and practice help you get the job done faster. I like to go for walks or bike rides. There are very good routes for cycling in Alexandria. I often visit regional libraries and once visited the Library of Congress. At home I like to look into the American Heritage Dictionary.

Safiya, Level 3

Trees help to clean the air. Trees provide beauty to nature. Books are good sources of information. Books are good friends for every one. I have a fast treadmill at home. I use my treadmill to burn fat.

Muhibullah, Level 3

I like the yellow leaves of the trees in Autumn. I don’t like a barren trees in Autumn. Tree leaves are always acceptable in Spring. Most of the trees are acceptable in the Summer season. Tree leaves are always pleasant for humans. We always love a green tree in the bright spring. The leaves of the trees bring freshness. Forests are full of trees and have different types of leaves.
Martha, Level 3

I enjoy going to church. Every Sunday, I got to church with my family and praise God. I also enjoy spending time with my kids. I like making time for my kids and watching TV, learning, and talking with them. Lastly, I enjoy playing basketball with my two sons. After school, I pick up my sons and take them to the basketball court and play with them. I see their skills expanding.

Aurelina, Level 3

We went with Canela to walk in the forest. She sat in the car. She always feels nervous. She enjoyed walking and looking at other dogs. When we returned, Canola was very hungry. This weekend Canola will not go walking.

Brekhna, Level 3

The Afghanistan flag has three colors. They mean this:
   Black means ignorance.
   Red means bloodshed and carnage.
   Green means greenness.

Cricket has 11 players. It has two teams. Cricket has 10 and 50 hour matches. The rose has many meanings. The rose can mean love or happiness or more things.

Bashir, Level 3

The TV is a part of my daily life. I watch my favorite channels and also read my Ebooks on the TV. I drive my car to work every day and also go on holidays and buy groceries with my car. I live with my family in my house. My daily activities start from my house and end in my house.

Hend, Level 3

My husband cooked seafood two days ago. There are several ways to cook fish, including grilling, boiling and baking. I went to the sea and caught a lot of fish. Fishing fish is great fun. By next year, I will have been building a big house already, I hope. The big house will have many rooms, a swimming pool and a gymnasium.
Where I'm From
Forozan, Level 5

I'm from rich organic fruit and vegetables where
smells of kebab and food attract you.
We all enjoy sharing food with friends and family,
every day hospitality passed
from one generation to another.
I'm from a landlocked country where land is like
sea blue and green.
I'm from mountains and high rocks with tall trees,
gardens of pomegranate and saffron,
where women are farmers,
heavy snowfall, city with white curtains.

But war took away our peace and brought hunger
Seeing a small beauty queen walking barefoot
I'm from a country where people die from hunger
where people with hunger are still hopeful people
are hopeful to have a plate of food on the table.

An aged women sits on the roadside and begging
for a loaf of bread
Begging to rescue her little child from dying

I'm from a country where we beg for education for
our little girls
education is valued more than food but we believe
we will survive because of my great people

We will shine again with our four-season land
Because we know after any dark night
The sun is rising again
We will rise again
God will bring peace

Where I am From
Sabine, Level 5

I am from God
Made in his image
Created from dirt and made with love.

I am from food
Pizza with extra cheese,
Fried chicken and Mom’s homemade spaghetti.

I am from family
A loving mother and a caring father,
Yet, I would not forget my grandpa,
Who served in the military for my freedom.

I am from colors,
Red days when I am angry,
Green days when I am envious,
And I cannot forget blue days when i am sad,
Yet, there are those days when everything seem white and so clear.
And I know that I should just keep on living.
Muna, Level 5

I am from in the middle of my sister & my brother.
We always laughing with my sister
And most of the time fight with my little brother
because of the TV remote
I am from the family making traditional coffee
every single night so we all gathered & chatted
I am from the family that loves holidays & other
celebrations & making foods in a big pot

I am from the people who believe in GOD & angels
Going to church every Sunday
praying at home.
Telling to them our problems & wishes
I pray every night to Kudus Gebriel & Adey Mariam
For my family and my baby

Where I was Born

Nona, Level 5

I was born in a big family. Ten children. My house had eight rooms, when I was
a little child. I thought I lived in a hotel.
I had a beautiful life, but a lot of noise
We were six sisters and we lent the clothes. Sometimes I say where are my pants,
my skirts, my shoes.
I was born in a Catholic family. We went to the Church every Sunday and we
prayed the rosary every night.
My parents were heroes. They had too much patience. We had a lot of love and
we had clear rules.
Now I remember with nostalgia the nice parties in Christmas. In that time I was
very, very happy.
Cindy, In-Person Level 5 Class teacher

I am from Rosaria + Boleslaw, Lucy + Andrew, Donna + Bill, my twin
Laughing, laughing all the time
Monopoly, Battleship, Scoop
Losing all the time

I am from every Saturday with my cousins
Made-up games, tuna sandwiches and cheddar cheese and salty olives
Eating peas still warm from the sun, picking green beans
Snapping all the time

I am from summer
Kickball, bikes, swimming with across the street friends
Reading, Corner shop, moments of boredom
Playing all the time

I am from
“Family comes first”
“Do you want a meatball grinder, dahlin”
and
“Are you twin twins?!”
Family all the time

Where We’re From
by the Level 6 In-Person Class: Bekir, Cookie, Felicia, Kate and Pat

We are individuals from countries near and far.
We are sons, daughters, husbands, wives, parents, and grandparents.
We are from different cultures and cuisines that have nourished us.
We are from family recipes and traditions that we keep and seek to share with new generations.
We are from simple joys and many wonders, from a lot of questions and inconclusive answers.
We are from different languages, fragrances, skies and stars and many ways of laughing and playing with words.
We are from magic and popular legends and stories, both sweet and bitter.
We are from dreams and hope in uncertain times.
And we are from here, sharing thoughts and experiences, creating memories, creating friendships.
When I think about being an immigrant, a lot of memories come to me. My maternal grandparents and my father were immigrants. They had immigrated to Buenos Aires, Argentina, from Italy. I can imagine them traveling on big ships over many days, with their clothes and memories in wooden trunks. I am from their hope and dreams, their decision to get a better life.

My grandmother was born in the Northeast of Italy, in a little town called Settimo Rottaro. She told me many stories about her hometown. One of these occurred when Halley’s comet crossed the world skies in 1910. People of the town believed that the Earth was going to crack. Many people sold their houses and goods, got drunk and became crazy and even committed suicide. Her father kept calm and said, “Let’s pray together, go to sleep and God will do what He wants.” The morning after, the sun shone again. So, she used to say “Trust in God and pray”.

I think I love reading stories because of her. She told my sisters and me magic and romantic stories. She also showed us letters and cards that our grandfather Pio wrote to her. They had gotten married in Buenos Aires, and they had had one daughter, Maria, my mom. My grandpa Pio passed away when my Grandma Fenicia was 46 years old. She never married again, and my sisters and I never met him.

Maria, my mom, is the first Argentinian in the family. My father was Italian. Sometimes, I think that if he hadn’t been in World War II, he might not have immigrated to Buenos Aires because he missed Italy very much. But, if he hadn’t immigrated, he wouldn't have met my mom and had five daughters.

I got married in 1986 to Carlos in Buenos Aires. His parents were immigrants too, but from Spain. We had three daughters and one son. We never thought about moving to other country, but sometimes life shows us other directions. And, after many years of taking flights and different decisions, my family moved to the United States (fortunately, not so far from each other.)

So, where am I from? I am from the dreams of immigrant generations building memories for new generations.

Amelia, my granddaughter, was born on May 29, 2023, in Arlington. She brings joy to this big noisy family. She is creating her own story, learning different languages and sharing different traditions. She writes a new chapter in the family story, and I am trying to bring my best pencils to color a little piece of it.