

ESL TO GO—A CLASSROOM ON WHEELS

When transportation is a challenge, taking language lessons to the learners

by Mary Morgan

“I have to learn English so I can survive in America. In Tennessee the driver’s permit test is in Chinese, Spanish and English. No Arabic. Why am I here if I can’t go anywhere? I can drive. If I don’t get a license, I can’t get to work, and I’ll lose my job.”

That’s fundamentally what Kurdish refugee Ibraheem Omer told his English teacher recently. And he was right. Because of routes and schedules, a bus from Ibraheem’s home to his job would take about 2 1/2 hours, even though the driving distance is only 8 miles, taking about 15 minutes. Bobby Hopkins, Ibraheem’s teacher, says Ibraheem is very typical of his students: “All of our students are refugees, none speak English, they have limited access to transportation. In order to make it in this country, you have to speak enough English for basic needs, typically including getting a driver’s license if you want to get to work.”

In 2011, Tennessee welcomed 1,236 refugees from 17 different countries, most of them settling in Nashville. As is true for the entire nation, the largest groups came from Bhutan, Burma and Iraq, but all of them had in common, as the United Nations puts it, having fled their country and being unwilling or unable to return due to a well-founded fear.

For a refugee, the first order of business is survival, and the key to survival in the United States, as Ibraheem knows, is learning English. For Angela Harris, Director of English as a Second Language and Teaching English as a Second Language at the Tennessee Foreign Language Institute (TFLI), making sure Nashville’s refugees learn English literally keeps her up at night.

One of those nights, an idea came to Harris after she attended a meeting



Photos TFLI

The ESL to Go truck.

of community leaders during which lack of transportation surfaced as the number one barrier refugees face in attending English classes. If the refugees couldn’t get to class because of lack of private transportation and the complexities and cost of public transportation, why not take the classes to the refugees? Not by the traditional method of trying to find a willing host in the refugee community, which proves difficult for cultural and other reasons, but with the same level of professionalism students encounter when they’re able to get to a local community center. Why not a classroom on wheels that could make the rounds of the apartment complexes where refugees live?



Angela Harris.

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Angela Harris with her students in Papua, New Guinea, 1992.

Thus was born the notion of ESL to Go. In a mobile classroom inside a custom-built truck, classes will be held around a table mimicking the traditional classroom setting where TFLI-trained instructors teach English at levels specific to the needs of the students. Students will be close to home, with no transportation worries or other distractions from the all-important task of learning to function in a foreign land and a foreign language.

Learning to function in a foreign land and a foreign language is an experience Harris relates to well. A Peace Corps Volunteer in Papua New Guinea from 1991 to 1993, Harris, who graduated from Tennessee Tech University with a degree in foreign languages and a teacher certification, spent eight years teaching English overseas, eventually establishing language programs and schools in South Korea and Nepal.

“In Papua New Guinea, as a Peace Corps Volunteer, I began to understand the tremendous value of a grassroots approach to development and education,” Harris says. “The single most important lesson I learned was that in order to teach effectively, I had to listen to and learn from those I was teaching. That’s a lesson I’ve never forgotten, and it’s carried me to this point in my career.”

Harris credits her Peace Corps experience giving her the foundational skills required to become a successful

leader in educating the refugees and immigrants in her home state of Tennessee. Harris taught English in Asia following her Peace Corps service, then settled in Nashville and began working at the Tennessee Foreign Language Institute, a unique state agency with the mission of teaching foreign languages to native Tennesseans and English to foreigners.

“Since joining TFLI in 1999, I’ve been able to put my accumulated experience and hands-on skills to good use in developing a program that teaches English to non-natives as well as a certification program to train teachers of English as a second language. I’m proud to say that after 35 cycles of the certification program, we have graduates teaching English all over the world, as well as right here in Nashville,” Harris notes.

Upon her return to Nashville after her overseas stints, Harris says she wasn’t sure what to expect in terms of continuing her career in adult ESL education. “But the Nashville I returned to wasn’t the one I left,” she says.

“Culturally diverse, even cosmopolitan, Nashville has become home to multi-lingual, multi-ethnic communities. A great many new refugees and immigrants struggle to achieve financial stability and social ties in a largely unfamiliar cultural landscape. Working with them has proven to be just as challenging and richly rewarding as

working in other countries.”

Harris’ work exemplifies the Third Goal of the Peace Corps—helping Americans understand the people and cultures of other countries. Her ability to bring groups together and leverage resources to benefit all stakeholders is evidenced by the new initiatives and community partnerships created under her leadership. Her experiential knowledge of grassroots development gained in the Peace Corps has enabled her to engage refugee resettlement agencies, private and government organizations, and foundations in support of common goals.

Harris’ newest initiative launched in April 2012 when the Tennessee Office for Refugees awarded funding for operating expenses to TFLI’s ESL to Go program. The team now consists of three full-time employees and a selection of part-time teachers. Fundraising to purchase the mobile classroom is still underway, with generous grants thus far from local foundations. In the meantime, TFLI is working in collaboration with area refugee resettlement centers to offer ESL classes at apartment complexes with existing classroom space. This is an acceptable solution for some, but won’t replace the mobile classroom because there are few apartment complexes with space to spare. The ESL to Go team plans to have the mobile classroom up and teaching by spring 2013.

For Harris, the ESL to Go project is the perfect storm that combines her Peace Corps experience with her Nashville experience. “Those lessons [in Peace Corps],” she says, “have guided me in developing leadership skills and creating educational programs culminating in the ESL to Go program. We have to help all those refugees like Ibraheem Omer build a new life here.”

ESL to Go welcomes private donations in any amount. For more information or to make a contribution, go to <http://www.crowdrise.com/esltohofundraiser/esl-to-go> or email angie@tfli.org.

Mary Morgan is the Director of Communications and Marketing for the Tennessee Foreign Language Institute.