

What Really Makes America Great?

By Brenda Morales

Immigrant. Refugee. Two words that have become a hot topic and political talking point. There may be confusion as many people do not fully understand what these terms mean. An immigrant is broadly defined as a foreign person living in another country while a refugee is one who cannot return to his or her home country due to fear of persecution which is based on race, religion, ethnicity, membership in a particular social group, or political beliefs (Department of Homeland Security, 2018). Barbara Law summed it up this way: *“An immigrant leaves his homeland to find greener grass. A refugee leaves his homeland because the grass is burning under his feet...”*

These words can conjure different images for different people. Some see a shadowy figure slipping silently over the border in an illegal attempt to become part of America. Others may think of a family member, coming through Ellis Island in search of a better life, or a neighbor or family friend. Still others equate these terms with terrorism.

I see the faces of children, the diverse groups of students who have sat in my classroom over the years. I see their families, coming to school with interpreters so they can better help their children succeed in this new environment. I see their nervousness on arrival, their smiles when they begin to understand, their pride when they can speak English.

I have taught ESL (English as a Second Language) for 17 years in an urban middle school. During those years, I have had students from a multitude of countries, speaking many languages, and with different levels of formal education. They arrive at school, uncertain about this new system they must adapt to. It is up to their teachers to help them adjust, but it often seems like just another thing on the to-do list.

One of my professors once said that all teachers are compassionate but ESL teachers make it an art form. It is this compassion that allows me to see the true abilities of my students. I am often the only one who knows that Jose* has a great sense of humor, Radha is sad because she misses her friends at home, Sunita is great at math but intimidated at the thought of talking in class. Compassion and building relationships with students are what

help me to do my job—to simultaneously teach them English and about life in the United States.

In return, my students have taught me many lessons. I have learned about different aspects of their cultures and what school was like in their home countries. I have learned which hand gestures to avoid and that sometimes it is ok for the class to simply talk, especially when the talk is prompted by genuine curiosity about each other's cultures and beliefs.

This past spring, during state testing of all middle school students, my students taught me what might be the most valuable lesson of all. We have heard a lot about "Making America Great Again!" As I entered the room to begin the testing, I saw the true greatness of the United States, sitting right in front of me. Hint: it wasn't the testing. It was the students.

I had a group of 12 students, all of them in the United States for less than three years. These 12 students, many of them refugees, came to America from three continents and nine countries. Between them, they speak at least eight languages, including English. Many of the students are multilingual; English is the third language for several of them. Some of these students lived in refugee camps; some were urban refugees. Some saw war up close, saw their homes destroyed. Some came with their families intact, others have family members still in their home country. Some never lived in the country they identify as their homeland; their parents left when war broke out and the children were born elsewhere, possibly a refugee camp. Some attended good schools and learned some English. Others did not.

Despite all of this, they are here, learning and growing. They bring their unique talents and interests. They participate in school activities and work hard to be successful. In my class of 13, nine were inducted into the honor society. They make friends with students whose backgrounds are very different from their own. Three of these boys, each from a different African country, started to come to my room during lunch. Their common language was English, which they used to teach each other useful phrases in their own languages. One of the girls was a gifted distance runner, participating in Girls

on the Run every year. Another was part of a traveling children's choir along with her two sisters.

These students must also must participate in state assessments at grade level despite their lack of English proficiency. It is time of stress for teachers and students. Many English Learners (ELs) and their families have high expectations for their academic success. They want to do well, but the test often makes them feel like failures.

Normally, I dislike proctoring these assessments. I am not permitted to do any work or even read. In addition, I do not believe that the assessments give any valuable feedback on my students' abilities, as so many of them are not proficient in English. This year was a little different. As I watched them work through this arduous test, I was so grateful to be their teacher. I felt a sense of satisfaction that I was among those who helped them navigate school and life in the U.S. I had the opportunity to learn about their experiences and encourage them in their goals. I have the privilege of helping the next generation of Americans learn and grow.

These students are more in a long line of immigrants who have enriched our country. With the recent focus on border security and strict standards for those who enter the United States as immigrants, it is obvious that those in power want us to believe that immigrants will take jobs, abuse the welfare system, or they do not assimilate and become "real Americans."

The truth is very different. We are a nation of immigrants. Since colonial times, people from other countries have moved to America for a better future. Immigrants bring new ideas, new innovations, and contacts to markets in diverse places. They create a demand for more goods and in general produce more tax revenue than they receive in government benefits (2002). Our history is one of creating a new national identity out of a previous one.

English learners and their families come to the United States for many reasons: some are assigned here as refugees, others come for jobs, better education, better health care, more opportunities to live fully. They will become the next generation of Americans, the ones who take over and take charge. They

bring with them their old identities but also become something new.

This has always been our history. People from diverse locations, coming to a new place, and forging a new identity. The new identity enriches both the individual and the community.

The U.S. motto is "E Pluribus Unum" or "Out of the many, one." To me, that means that, despite our differences, we can become united. We simply have to let it happen and embrace our differences, instead of rejecting them.

**All student names are pseudonyms*

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Brenda Morales has taught English Language Development (ELD) at Reynolds Middle School in Lancaster, PA for 18 years. She has a master's degree with a concentration in ESL from the Universidad del Turabo in Puerto Rico and is currently enrolled



in a doctoral program through Concordia-Portland. Brenda has presented twice at the WIDA National convention on the topic of refugees and twice at a Diverse Literacies conference in Pennsylvania. In her spare time, she loves to read, watch sci-fi shows with her husband, and walk her greyhounds.