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Smiles, Bananas, and Love

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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph:

English is the only language I can speak fluently. So one might ask how I spent the last year of my life greeting my students with “Wallagay.”



Jennifer Sadallah (2010)

Smiles, Bananas, and Love

English is the only language I can speak fluently. So one might ask how I spent the last year of my life greeting my students with “Wallagay”.

It all started a year ago, with a decision I made entirely on a gut feeling.

In between my graduate course work, I substitute taught at the Utica Adult Learning Center. Upon graduation I was offered a full time position teaching English as a Second Language to adult refugees. Even though this opportunity was outside of my biology background, I felt the overwhelming urge to accept it. Never have I been so thankful.

My adult students were from all parts of the world; however, a vast majority were from Bhutan, Nepal, Burma (now Myanmar), and Thailand. They were all refugees, forced to move from their homes across the world to find a place of safety and freedom. Many of them had lost family members and came without any possessions. All of my students were religious and their practices varied. I had a mixture of Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and a variety of Christians in my room. As different as my students were, they sat side by side in harmony.

In my first few days, the task of lesson planning for my new job seemed overwhelming. But my students were understanding and patient with me as their new teacher. I quickly learned that laughter is a universal language. I was in awe at the sense of humor my refugees possessed.

Soon I came to realize that the rules of language didn't really matter if my students weren't willing to speak. Coming from countries that had taken away all their basic freedoms, I needed to give them a voice. My new goal was to make my students feel comfortable and safe in their learning environment. I started incorporating games and meditation into our routine, and I learned words and phrases in my students' languages. My mornings began with smiles and greetings in at least five different languages.

Even though I was the teacher, I couldn't help but feel that my students knew something I didn't. Throughout the year I found out my intuition was correct; they knew about life.

Most of my students had very little formal education, yet they came to school every day eager to learn. They wanted to speak English so they could get any job that allowed them to support their family.

As I was focused on making my students feel comfortable, I was unprepared for their innate hospitality. On a daily basis I would receive yogurt, bananas, and home cooked meals from people who barely had the means to feed their own families. Never had I experienced such kindness and respect. We became more than a teacher and students; we became friends.

Being around my students was a humbling experience. They taught me about the kind of person I want to be. They showed me love, and selflessness. They gave when most would think there was nothing left to give. They were optimistic and happy despite such difficult life circumstances. *They are hope.*

This past year was one of the most amazing gifts of my life, and it came wrapped in smiles, bananas, and love.



Jennifer Sadallah and some of her "friends"