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MEET TWO OF OUR FORMER ESL STUDENTS

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I'm originally from Baghdad, Iraq. I immigrated with my husband and children to the U.S. in 2009. For the first three years in the U.S., I helped my family to settle in to the new culture and language. Then I decided to continue my education.

I earned my bachelor's degree in Electrical Engineering in 1997 from Baghdad University. I got married 3 months after I graduated and had 3 children within 5 years of graduation. Family responsibilities, followed by the outbreak of war in 2003, kept me from being able to work in my field. I was forced to leave the country in 2006 for the safety of my family. We went to Egypt and stayed there for 3.5 years. I wasn't allowed to work there because of the type of visa I held.

When we got to the U.S., I had my engineering degree evaluated. Even though it was equivalent to a U.S. degree, I didn't have work experience so it was hard to find a job. I decided to pursue my master's degree although this meant returning to school after a 17 year absence. My biggest educational challenge was starting an advanced degree in a new field in a new system and of course in a different language.

In order to start my master's, I had to take a TOEFL test. I had studied English in Iraq, but I decided to start with ESL classes at Reynolds because I knew that learning a language is a process that takes time. The 4 ESL classes I took here all helped me to refresh and expand my English language skills. I was so proud to be accepted into the master's program and finish my degree with a 4.0 GPA.

When I left Reynolds to get my master's, I hoped to return here to teach in the future. I was so happy when in the fall of 2016, I was offered an adjunct teaching position here! I have been teaching two classes each semester since then. When I started teaching at Reynolds, I was assigned to teach a class that was not part of my master's program; I hadn't studied this subject since my undergraduate degree. The second semester, I was asked to teach two classes that I had never studied before. I started to learn the material ahead of the students, which was a big challenge for me. My students in these classes did very well, and I was so proud of them and of myself. Even with a degree, you have to be open to taking on new challenges and to learning new things.

My oldest child is completing her associate's degree in Business here at Reynolds and plans to pursue a bachelor's degree and MBA. My oldest son has applied to the Engineering School at VCU. The youngest two still have time to figure out their career paths. I'd like to thank my parents, husband, and children for their ongoing support during my own educational journey here. We lost a lot when we left Iraq – our home, my husband's job, etc., but we see a bright future here in the U.S.





I was born and raised in Romania, moved to United States in my late 20s, and within a year I enrolled at Reynolds Community College. How frightening the school in United States felt, and how I dreaded being different than the rest of the students! As a nonnative speaker of English, I had an accent and often chose not to speak. I frequently misspelled words and wrongfully conjugated most of my verbs, which made it very uncomfortable to write. I was receptive, though, and my ESL professor, Marty Watkin, gradually made me confront my fears by challenging me to speak and write, intensively. I slowly started to come out of my shell and began to see Reynolds from a different perspective. My ESL classmates had their own accents and shared similar stories and high hopes. Throughout the semester, under the glowing eyes of our ESL professor, we kept encouraging each other and started gaining confidence. It was our fertile ground.

We all got our ESL certificate that fall and continued our academic journeys, but sadly, we lost track of each other in the process. As for myself, as soon as I graduated from Reynolds, I transferred to VCU and obtained two bachelor's degrees, one in Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness and the other in Foreign Language with a concentration in Spanish. While I was at VCU, I worked part-time at the VCU's Language Lab. Soon, I interviewed for Transportation Security Administration (TSA), which hired me as a part-time officer at Richmond International Airport. By 2017, I successfully defended my master's thesis in Foreign Languages, Culture and Literature at Virginia Tech, and within months I got promoted. Today I am a security training instructor for my fellow TSA Officers at Myrtle Beach International Airport, and I am striving to go higher.

You may ask me if today I am shy to speak, or if I still misspell words, or if I slip grammatical errors in my writing. Sometimes I do, however, with a much lower frequency than before. Remember that education is a continuous process that will not stop with completing the ESL requirements or earning a graduate degree, and not even with obtaining a doctoral degree, I dare to say. The secret ingredient of success resides within yourself, and it has to do with your willingness to constantly improve. So, dear reader and beloved ESL students, be receptive to every piece of feedback throughout your journey, wherever that might take you. I did it, and so can you!

Aura Villanueva



In the past year, students from all corners of the world have come through the ESL office doors: Afghanistan, Albania, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Bosnia/Herzegovina, Brazil, Bulgaria, Burundi, Cambodia, Cameroon, China, Colombia, Congo, Cuba, Czech Republic, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Egypt, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Gabon, Ghana, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Libya, Mexico, Moldova, Mongolia, Morocco, Nepal, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Norway, Pakistan, Palestinian Territories, Panama, Peru, Philippines, Portugal, Russia, Rwanda, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, South Korea, Spain, Sudan, Syria, Taiwan, Thailand, Togo, Turkey, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Venezuela, Vietnam.