

Formerly
Language ETC

Washington English Center

Improving the lives of immigrants through education.

Volunteer and Student Stories

VOLUNTEER



Milyeri Nicole Hopkins Matthee

At Washington English Center, we love to boast about our volunteer retention rate. From term-to-term, our volunteers return over 80% of the time! One of those volunteers is Milyeri Matthee.

Volunteers tend to fall in two categories: they like to stay in one level, or they like to try all the levels. Milyeri falls in the latter category. "Having taught some students for multiple terms," says Milyeri, "I've observed not only improvements in their English language fluency, but I've also witnessed their self-confidence blossom." She has worked with students struggling through that initial silent stage of second language acquisition, and has seen them progress to "confident and vocal students that frequently ask questions and volunteer to give answers in class."

The unique model we use at WEC is co-teaching: two teachers in every class. Milyeri tends to be quiet and reserved, while her co-teacher tends to be loud and outgoing. They complement each other well to create a vibrant, dynamic learning atmosphere. "My favorite aspect of co-teaching is having someone to share the experiences of teaching these amazing students." Milyeri summarizes: "Together, we teach more effectively."

The positive, warm, and welcoming environment is what brings back our teachers and students every semester. "Of course, learning English is important, but I would argue that almost equally important, is the community that students, particularly those who are recent immigrants, are welcomed into. Every week, I'm thankful to be a part of this community."

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Khayal Guliyev

“We all have a story,” says Khayal Guliyev. “I have my own.” Khayal’s story begins in his native country of Azerbaijan, and has led him to Washington English Center where he began teaching in fall 2014. “I love teaching and am passionate about volunteering. So the opportunity at WEC was a perfect match.”

Khayal has been teaching English for about 20 years, and has previous experience with the Peace Corps as a Training Director in his native country. What makes Khayal the ideal teacher? He speaks seven languages, and he “can literally picture what is going on in my students’ heads when they are learning... I have been there myself on many occasions.” Khayal strives to provide the same success story to his students that he has become.

The compassion and dedication exemplified by Khayal are what we look for in our teachers. A key to successful teaching is understanding that our students are all different. “Students that come to WEC have different stories – some of them are embassy officials, diplomats, busboys and cleaners, and some asylum seekers and torture victims. I love WEC because of its diversity.” Khayal has gone beyond simply teaching by bringing in many students to attend English classes. When asked why, he replied “To me, WEC is way more than just a language school. It is a safe place for everyone and a hub of different cultural communities.”



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Kathleen Kearney

When Kathleen Kearney began volunteering at Washington English Center in 2009, she was trudging through her day job at a local law firm. “I realized in 2012, after three years at WEC, that I love to teach,” says Kathleen. “I would say that WEC was THE influence in my decision to become a [professional] teacher.” Kathleen traded in the office for the classroom, and she hasn’t looked back since, earning her TEFL certificate from Georgetown in 2013.

Typically, you will find Kathleen volunteering as a language lab instructor leading classes in our computer lab. “The language lab is actually a very glamorous place.”

She continues, “It is a portal to cognitive change, international communication and new knowledge.” Kathleen has seen the lab grow

“I love teaching and am passionate about volunteering.”

with new technology and new resources. "The technology resources have expanded every year. There is a second language lab, laptops and projectors for the teachers, and iPads to manage the classes."

"One of the things I love most about WEC is the synergy – intellectual and social. I think it is a life-altering place for both the teachers and the taught." In the past six years, Kathleen has worked with hundreds of volunteers and thousands of students. "The students are hardworking, disciplined and eager to learn. I love the students at WEC."

Laura Iglesias

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Volunteering at Washington English Center doesn't always mean just teaching a class. Just ask Laura Iglesias. Her role as a volunteer has her teaching, assisting the front office, contributing to audio visual projects, and participating as a member of the Associate Board. Very few volunteers at our school have done so much in so many different capacities, and her contributions have helped augment our programs in many ways.



Originally from Mexico City, Laura has always had an affinity for learning English. As a native Spanish speaker Laura says, "The little knowledge I had was strengthened by studying and the help that I received from my English teachers." She was apprehensive to teach when she first joined WEC, and decided to help as a front office assistant. "This chance," continues Laura, "opened the door for me to gain confidence in my knowledge in the classroom."

Laura truly has a unique perspective. She has done it all over the past three years: she has taught in all levels, worked with students from different backgrounds, and helped with some of the most tedious assignments that staff often gets bogged down in. Why does she continue to do it? "Every time I meet a student who is just beginning to learn English, I see myself going through the same experience." She continues, "I feel that I am part of the foundation of a skill that is for life."

You can now find Laura teaching weeknights, attending Associate Board meetings on Saturdays, and floating around the office with a camera working on projects for the school.

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Farhanaz Kermalli

A common trait found in all volunteers, before their first day of class or after many years of teaching, is the exuberance and enthusiasm they bring to their volunteer service. In 2009, Farhanaz Kermalli entered our school with this excitement and, six years later, she still exudes it in her class.

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"It's really awe-inspiring to recognize the dedication students put into their study of English," comments Farhanaz. "For most, this is after a full day of work." Over the years, she has

observed the growth and confidence of so many of our hard working students. "It can be in big ways, like expressing the desire to enroll in online university courses, or even smaller ways, like building friendships and camaraderie." The learning goals of our students vary, but Farhanaz is continually impressed by the motivation and success of our students in achieving their goals.

Farhanaz embodies so much of what our school is made of. Her family is originally from India, but rooted in Zanzibar; she was born in Dubai, and relocated to California when she was three years old. "I think my personal understanding of what it feels like to have a sense of place and identity influences my interactions in the classroom." Farhanaz continues, "Having sensibilities that cross continents make me particularly interested in learning about each student's background...One of my favorite parts about our classrooms is how diverse they are."

Washington English Center has made a concerted effort to improve our teacher training opportunities, and to upgrade our educational technology. "I have seen the program invest in both the student and teacher experience," Farhanaz notices. "Better use of technology has encouraged me to think about how to add multimedia and even use of smartphones during class time." Farhanaz strives to be a better teacher with each passing semester by being open to learning new teaching methods, and enhancing the learning experience of her students by incorporating new technologies.

Abdilkadir Tufa

Ethiopia represents a growing demographic of the Washington English Center's diverse student body. One of the faces of Ethiopia you can find roaming the halls on any given day is Tufa, level 1A, on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Tufa came to America to escape political discord in his country. He is currently working



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with a partner organization, TASSC International, and is also looking for a job with the help of our Employment Specialist, Claire Kevill.

"Since English is the language of the land," explains Tufa, "I have to be able to speak it well." He continues, "I like class because of the talking and writing. It's good."

And Tufa is doing a great job in his studies. Emily Naber,

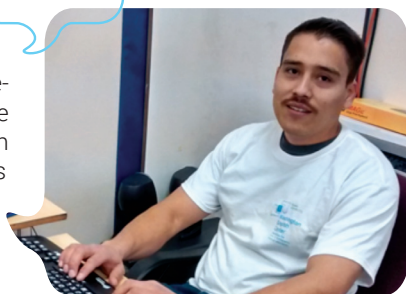
Director of Curriculum and Instruction, noted just how much he has improved in the last year and a half. "It is such a joy to see Tufa socializing comfortably with staff and other students...His progress this year has been so remarkable that he is now even able to help the office staff by interpreting for students who speak Oromo or Amharic. We are very proud of Tufa's hard work and perseverance in learning English."

Tufa is always smiling and talking to other students - always finding ways to use English.

Julian Aguilar-Figueroa

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"There is a whole world inside." This is the way Julian Aguilar-Figueroa aptly describes the internet and the new found access he has to it. When Julian first came to Washington English Center in the summer of 2008 this was something he had heard about, but he did not know the added benefits it could provide in his life. The key for Julian having access to these benefits has been learning English.



Julian began studying English at the Basic level. His skills steadily progressed over the next three years to be an intermediate-high speaker, and along the way he began attending in Washington English Center's Computer Literacy classes as well. Initially, he only knew how to play games, but soon he "learned how to create email accounts, letters in Microsoft Word...then I started exploring the internet."

The English and computer literacy skills Julian gained at WEC, coupled with his drive and motivation, have taken him far. He is now an outgoing, talkative, gregarious bar tender in DC. He regularly uses computers at work to take orders, and at home to stay in touch with his community. Julian encouraged his sister to attend so that she could benefit as well. She is hoping to improve her conversation skills and enter graduate school. Julian, being a good brother, is supporting her through her journey.

"There is a whole world inside."

Dusan and Nikola Tisma

Three days after their arrival in the United States, brothers Nikola and Dusan Tisma found their way to Washington English Center. Commonly known as “the Serbian brothers” by staff and volunteers, both Nikola and Dusan are quick to shake your hand and strike up a conversation – showing the amiable, open eagerness of our great student body.



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The Tismas journeyed to America for many of the same reasons you will find of all of our students at Washington English Center. Nikola explains, “I came to the US to start a new life it was my wish, my dream. And today I am very happy.” Dusan continues, “We came here to help our parents, and to be here as a family.” Now they have become a huge part of the WEC family. Nikola and Dusan attend classes Monday through Thursday mornings, and both have had perfect attendance! Their commitment to learning is admirable, and their praises for the school are high. “I meet good friends in school....The teachers are very good,” says Dusan. “I feel very good,” agrees Nikola.

Nikola and Dusan expressed their desire for the “good life.” To them that means good jobs, being with family, and continued success. Their American dream is to have the “usual things.” The Serbian brothers represent the same wishes and goals of many of our students – and many of our volunteers and supporters, too.

Susana and Amadeo Marinez

The relationships forged by students and teachers at Washington English Center make an intangible facet of our school that contributes to the atmosphere of learning and friendship. And just as important is when students, from different cultures in different parts of the world, create these same bonds throughout their learning.



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In 2002, Susana and Amadeo met in their level two English class. From opposite sides of the globe, the chances of a woman from the Philippines and a man from El Salvador meeting in America may seem slim; but this is what we see at WEC all the time. It was during this class that Amadeo began buying snacks for Susana at break-time to be able to continue speaking with her. Amadeo was unique in that he didn't first go to another native Spanish speaker. Instead he and Susana developed their relationship through their target language: English.

Over the winter semester Susana received a Valentine card from Amadeo, and they began dating. They married after four years of being together. They are currently studying in Washington English Center's citizenship class on Saturday mornings. "It's a beautiful thing to see two people from antipodal hemispheres find and develop their love through a continued quest for knowledge and citizenship," says citizenship teacher Chelsea Milko. "Theirs is the quintessential immigrant love story."

We wish Mr. and Mrs. Martinez the best as they continue their studies! They are pictured above in 2002 and 2015!

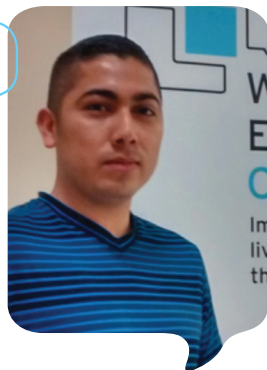
Julio Alberto Lopez

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At Washington English Center, it is our mission to provide student centered English instruction to help students achieve their life goals. Julio Alberto Lopez is the perfect example of a model student on his way to reaching his goals and never quitting on his dreams.

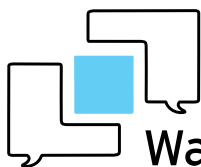
When Julio came to WEC in 2013, he was working as a dishwasher. He was unsatisfied with his job, and frustrated with his English skills. He quickly realized he needed to improve his English to improve his life. "I want to have a better job," says Julio. "Before, I was afraid to speak with customers." The life skills English lessons taught at WEC have given Julio the confidence he needs to advance in his career. Julio is now a cashier, a position requiring him to use English confidently and accurately.

"I learned many things," says Julio about his time studying at WEC. "The teachers try to force you so you have to understand everything. We try to understand more – to think more." As Julio passes through his English classes, he now prepares for his next challenge: to earn his GED. "It is very important for me." Julio plans to attend university to study forensic science, and to hopefully land his dream job. He has a long journey ahead of him, but he has the dedication and work ethic to achieve his goals.



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