The JOY of WRITING 2017

Poems, stories, and narratives written by the adult students of Literacy Volunteers of Charlottesville/Albemarle.
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Life is Good
by Sahar Abdullah

My name is Sahar. I am from Afghanistan. I have been living in Charlottesville. I was born in Afghanistan.

I was very small when we moved to many countries before here. We went to Russia. There we had a good life. I was busy with my studies. Finally, I finished my school. Then I took the test for University. I passed. They gave me a scholarship for six years. At that time, my major was dentistry.

During this time, our documents were approved. After a few months, we came to the USA. I was very sad about stopping my studies. When I came here, I felt lucky to continue my studies and to better my life.

My English was good. In the Adult Learning Center, I took my GED test to continue my college successfully. I passed. I am very happy.

All my dreams will come true. My mom’s dreams, too. She wants me to become a doctor in the future. I love my mom. She’s helped my life. She’s helping me in every step of my life.

Now I am in PVCC. It’s my second semester. My major is in the medical field. Also, I’m taking one class in Literacy Volunteers, too.
This summer, my family took a trip to Maryland. My aunt’s family and my uncle’s family joined us on the trip. On the first day of Eid Alfitter (the feast day following Ramadan), we spent a wonderful time in the harbor of Baltimore.

We wandered inside to the aquarium and saw different kinds of fish and other sea creatures, such as penguins, sea turtles, snakes, and jellyfish.

We spent three days in Baltimore. One of the things we did was to eat in an Arabic restaurant. There we had a lunch feast of Shawarma (a meat dish), salad, fresh baked bread, and baklava.

I really enjoyed having my whole family there. I will never forget this trip.
Try Something New for Your Life

by Ali Al Tameemi

With each day dawns a unique opportunity to grow love through understanding and education. The pursuit of education excites with new challenges and things unknown while the attainment of education creates new paths forward that open doors of opportunity for understanding that can create love and culture in the world for many generations.

I started my education journey with a clear path forward. I was going to study Economics at the University in the Capital of my home country, Iraq. The first experience on my journey was failure when I did not receive a placement score high enough to enroll in economics classes. I had to make a new path. Confused, I took counsel from friends, family, and professionals. I was faced with the decision to either find a different University, or change my major. Choosing a different University meant leaving my home and family to travel South to study. If I stayed, the University had recommended Psychology, an entirely new subject for me.

After asking many questions about what does this mean for my life, I enrolled in the study of Psychology. My decision was based on what I learned about how an education in Psychology would give me the skills I needed to help others solve problems and find better ways of living. Eager, willing, I embarked on the path with a clear conviction that education would provide opportunity not only for myself, but for others.
My first year at a new school studying a totally new subject was difficult. I struggled in my education until I met a group of friends. We studied together and pushed each other to work harder and find ways to engage in helping others outside of our school lessons. Soon I began to love Psychology. By graduation, my education had given me the tools to help others which in turn gave my life energy and richness of experience. My pursuit of education showed me how to overcome obstacles, take risks, and pursue the unknown. My attainment of education helped me to find better ways to solve problems and create love through understanding. These lessons carry over into my daily life and encourage me to learn and try new things every day.

In 2015, I moved to America with very little English education. The move felt very difficult. Not just a new place but a new culture. Feeling always lost even when doing the simplest things. Instead of feeling very badly, I realized that I need to work twice as hard starting from zero. I did not get down, instead I relied on my ability to learn. I pushed myself and set difficult education goals knowing that studying hard would make my life better in many small and big ways, but also allow me to contribute to making everyone’s life better around me. If I can understand others, I can make them feel safe, and teach them a new skill that might awaken a new love in them. I found out about the Adult Learning Center and started with the Literacy Volunteers of Charlottesville. The day to day small things are continually getting easier as my vocabulary and cultural understanding improves with practice.

As I continue my education journey, I remember two important things. First that education is not diminished by sharing it. Second that sharing of education has a lasting effect on local people and more widely on culture as skills and knowledge get passed around and
passed down. In this life, we have to help each other because we all need the help. Education has provided me with a skill for listening and understanding how I can help others. On my education journey, I’ve failed, started over, succeeded, felt tired, and felt joy. Education is what brings love to my life by increasing my opportunities to meet and understand others and contribute to a world where everyone feels safe.

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**My New Job**

by Jose Juvenal Zaragoza Herrera

I’m a student. On my vacation, I’m going to work. I’m very excited because this is my first job in the United States.

I will be cooking on the line. I will cook burritos, tacos, quesadillas and churros. I will cook two different kinds of meat: chicken and beef. It’s a big restaurant. There are four prep cooks and four cooks on the line.

I’m working because I want to have work experience in this country.
I Found What I Was Looking For

by Sixta Arguelles Acevedo

When I came to Virginia from Puerto Rico, I decided to find a job in a school. Because everything was new for me and I had no family in Charlottesville, I started being a volunteer in my children’s elementary school. One day, checking on the website on Albemarle County Public Schools, I found the category, employment.

After filling out several job applications about secretary and teaching assistant, I found a vacancy as a teaching assistant for the Spanish Immersion Program. I was excited when they called me for an interview. I wore appropriate clothes for the occasion. I practiced some possible questions that they might ask. After the interview, they called me for the job. This is now my third year working in an elementary school in that program.

With my first year of experience and my English tutorials at Literacy Volunteers, I applied for another position in the after school program Extended Day Enrichment Program (EDEP). During the training, I raised my hand for reading a paragraph of
a book in front of the audience. I felt proud of myself!

I had a purpose. It took me six months to a year and a half and much effort to find the two jobs. I have been improving my second language. I was focused on my goal and I succeeded!

Homework in My Life
by Sunghee Kim

I have a kitty cat that has over a hundred questions. After he turned five years old, he had so many questions. He loves street lamps more than anything. Every night he goes to the street lamps of the town and he has to check if there is an electrical cord or not. He has to make sure that the cord must be plugged in to light the street lamps. “Why is there no outlet cover on the street lamps,” he thinks. Even as he lay in bed, the light must be on after he falls asleep.

I came to America with my husband who wanted to study abroad. I still remember the day my husband and I met our first child in the hospital. My mom could not come from South Korea because she was sick. I had never learned about how to parent. My teachers were books and the Internet.
Over the past five years, I thought this way. A child is someone we have to learn from and about. I became a woman and a mother. I am the whole world and the whole universe to him. I wanted to do something for him I haven’t done before. I want to show him where I haven’t been. When he is sick, I want to be sick instead. Is this the parent’s emotion? One day, when he grows up to become an adult, I want to tell him I am not the best. I saw the world through you and I lived in a beautiful world with you. You are the biggest assignment in my life, and I know my homework will never be over in this lifetime.

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Ghost Fires
by Zhen Chen

When I was a little girl in China, my grandfather told me a story.

A long time ago in his village, every evening at the same time, three ghost fires passed the road close to their village. Then they disappeared to a far place. They were three small fires and flew close to the road. The village people called them “ghost fires.” In the evening, some villagers stood at the end of the village to watch the ghost fires far away. Nobody got close to them. People got curious more and more. They wanted to know what things passed the road every evening.

A young guy did something. He dug a hole in the middle of the road and covered it with a bamboo mat. He hid in the hole. A lot of villagers stood at the end of the village to watch. At the same evening
time, the three ghost fires came. When they floated above the hole, they stopped. Then they went around the hole again and again fast for a long time. When they left, the villagers didn’t see the boy get out. The villagers ran to the hole and found the boy passed out in the hole. They carried him home. When the boy felt well, he told the villagers he didn’t find out anything. When the ghost fires went around the hole, he passed out.

Since then, the ghost fires never showed up again. Nobody knows what they were. Where were they from? Where did they go?

Sometimes I read about UFOs. I always remember that story. I think maybe the “ghost fires” maybe are a kind of UFO? They are maybe from a mysterious place or a star? Maybe they are just ghost fires.
One night, my husband left his iPhone in his truck. When he went to work, he couldn’t find the phone. Somebody unlocked the truck and took the phone.

I called SPRINT, and they locked his cell so nobody could use it.

Two weeks later, somebody called me and said, “I have your iPhone. I bought it for $200. Give me my money back and I will give you your phone.”

But I was scared to call the police. So I called my English tutor, Sarah.

I explained what happened with my husband’s iPhone. She didn’t understand the plan but she met me at the gas station.

I wanted her to go with me because I was scared and she could explain that I would pay something, but not $200. That’s still less money than getting a new phone. Because we didn’t have insurance, but now we do.

When we met with the man with the phone, outside the store near
me, Sarah and I talked with him. When I asked for the phone, he gave it to me.

The case was scratched, but it still worked well.

He said, “Give me my $200 back and I’ll give you the phone.” I said, “No, I’ll only pay you $100.”

Then he said, “No, I’m married, I have kids and my wife’s birthday is soon. I need the money now.”

I said, “Ok, I give you $120.”

He said, “No, $150.”

I said, “No, $140.”

He said, “OK!!”

My husband was mad because I paid the money to the man instead of calling the police. But I felt safer paying instead of making the man mad because I called the police. I wanted to protect my family from the police and the man.

My friends laughed at me for paying $140. Maybe it’s funny, but it is better than paying $780 for a new iPhone and problems with the police or with the robber.

Now we have insurance on our iPhone and I laugh when I tell the iPhone story.
I am from El Salvador. I come from a humble family: my parents, two sisters and one brother. I’m the youngest in my family.

When I was in high school I recall one time when a teacher was absent, the principal came to my classroom and asked, “Who would like to substitute today for the absent teacher?” I immediately volunteered. Why? Because I love children. That day was when I decided to make teaching my career.

When I finished high school, I started my undergraduate education degree. I studied for five years in college and obtained my undergraduate education degree.

I applied to the Secretary of Education, and after a year I was finally interviewed. The problem was that the place where I was assigned to work was very dangerous. My father told me not to take the job, but I disobeyed him because I had wanted so long to start my chosen career. The school, “Hacienda El Angel,” was in a rural area, and I took the risky position. It was the time of the Salvadoran Civil War, and I had many difficult experiences including lack of transportation, threats, and being in the middle of sometimes violent confrontations.

A year later, I was transferred to a school in the city of San Juan Bosco where I worked for 16 years. These were the most wonderful years of my life. Working with middle school age children gave me some of the best memories of my life.
When you can provide children not only knowledge but also principles, values, norms of behavior, and good study habits, it can be very gratifying. But the greatest thing I found was to allow children to feel loved and protected, especially in a country with the problems that exist in El Salvador.

When the children came to me with a smile and told me their difficulties, I hugged them and told them how important they were to me and to their parents. I soon came to understand that teaching is more of a privilege than just a job.

In each student, I saw the opportunity to help according to their individual needs – physical, psychological, and economic welfare. I worked 16 years in school with middle school students, and I had wonderful experiences. Three times I was named “Teacher of the Year.” All of this led me to be more committed to my work.

God is the center of my life and my motto is “Whatever your task, put yourself into it, as you do for the Lord, and not just for your masters.”

For me, the most rewarding things were the smiles, the hugs and the kisses on the cheek they gave me when they arrived at school, the sincerity with which they said, “I love you” or “I miss you” – that was priceless.

I learned that school has to be a magical, happy world where the children learn by playing. One of the most important things is for them to feel motivated to return to school every day and see in their teacher a friend, and often times a mother figure.

In a group of students, each one works at his or her own pace. I learned in my work to identify the needs or weaknesses of each student to help them in both. I also learned to give myself to these children with love and dedication without expecting anything in return.
Forging and instilling in each child good values, principles, and habits of study is necessary to make them productive and positive members of society.

I’m happy to be in the United States, in a country which has a lot of choices. I’m living in Kents Store, and I am learning English at the Thomas Jefferson Adult Learning Center. In time, I would like to be an assistant teacher because to me life is service and I like to serve others, especially children.

Hard Lives and Bad Decisions

by Remberto Cruz Mejia

Immigrants have to make hard decisions when they come to the United States. Immigrants come to help their families, but this solution creates other problems. My friend came from Mexico to the U.S. He came to make money to help his family. He sent money home the whole time he was here for four or five years. His girlfriend was in Mexico and he sent her money all the time, too. Sometimes the girlfriend was with other men. My friend was lonely too, but he wasn’t with other women. He decided to go back to Mexico because he missed his family.

When he went home and was with his family, he saw a baby.

He asked his girlfriend, “Whose baby is this?”

She said, “I’m the mother, but it was just one experience. You were still in the U.S.”
He said, “Yes, I was still in the U.S., but the whole time I was working for you and my family. I don’t like that you were with other men. I love you, but not this baby. This is not my son. Do you love me? I love you, but not this baby.”

She said, “Maybe I have a solution for later.”

He was still not happy. Some days he and his girlfriend went to the river to swim, and maybe he and his girlfriend got an idea. They put the baby in a high place up the hill from the river. Maybe they thought that if the baby started to move around on the blanket, he’d roll down into the water. They went to a different place on the river, and swam and showered. When they came back to where they’d left the baby, the baby was in the water and they pretended they were surprised. They took the baby and had a funeral.

There was an investigation by the police, and the judge decided that both the man and his girlfriend were culpable for the baby’s death. The judge sentenced each of them to 20 years in jail.

The baby was innocent. The man and his girlfriend each made a bad decision. They thought of only how to get rid of the baby to fix their problem. The man and his girlfriend had other babies from before he went to the U.S. Now those babies had to be cared for by other family members.
My Dream is Coming to the U.S.
by Isabel Fernandez

Hi, my name is Isabel. I’m from Puebla, Mexico.

I have been living in Charlottesville, VA for 13 years. In 2004 I met my husband and I have two children. My daughter’s name is Estephanie. She is 11 years old and my son’s name is Alexis. He is 8 years old.

When I was living in Puebla, I dreamed of coming to the U.S. for a better future. I love my family. For my children I decided to learn English because I needed to help my children with homework.

Thank God for my family and these volunteers who help me learn English. I like Charlottesville.
Anxiety from Mysterious Footprint
by Tenzin Gephel

When my roommate and I moved into an apartment, there was already a large shape which looked like a footprint on the floor carpet. It was about one foot long and five inches wide. If the owner had not seen it before we moved in, he may think this is a footprint made by one of us. But we are physically small, and we cannot make such a footprint even if we tried to. The owner may think we are aliens with big bodies from another galaxy, yet manifested here in small bodies. In case we need to explain to the owner that this footprint was already here before we moved into the apartment, we took a picture of it with our cell phone. But actually, I don’t know how we will convince the owner that that is really not our footprint. Just a picture with an explanation may not be solid evidence that neither the print was ours nor we are from another galaxy. My anxiety is still growing.
One day, I was watching the news on T.V. The news reporter said that Pope John Paul II will be coming to Mexico for the second time. His visit was scheduled for the year 1990. The news reporter showed me the travel route of the Pope on the map of Mexico.

The Library of Mexico in Mexico City was a perfect location for his visit. The Pope will be in a meeting with professors, lawyers, doctors and scientists. I was happy because I was always in the Library of Mexico to study. So for me, it was a great surprise.

I read a biography of the Pope’s life. Pope John Paul II was a beautiful person. I felt much respect, admiration and affection for him. I think that he was a man who suffered very much, but he always attempted to improve intellectually and spiritually. The suffering was his strength and his triumph. For me, he was the face of LOVE.

He was strict, but he was also very nice. His words were full of love. I identified with him because I understood that suffering can change into positive energy and in doing so, a person can obtain intellectual and spiritual development. I decided finally that I would go and see Pope John Paul II.
I was waiting for the Pope along Balderas Street. I was so excited. Some people were praying and others were singing. I was, too. Pope John Paul II appeared in his white car. He stopped for five minutes in front of us. I was very happy. He smiled at us. The people were screaming, “John Paul II, you are Mexican and we love you. I see, I feel the Pope is present. John Paul II, you are our friend.” The Pope gave his blessing. I saw his glittering face. My body and my soul trembled with delight. I had seen Pope John Paul II. It was a mystical moment for me. When I remember this, I feel happy and content...intelligently and spiritually.

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Children are Expensive

by Khamis Hassan

I have five children with my first wife. Four are in the U.S. I have nine children with my second wife. All nine are in the U.S. I have 38 grandchildren.

In Africa, children are cheap. No school, no shoes, work in the garden. In the U.S., children are expensive. School, bags, books, clothes, shoes, food. In the U.S., stop at two children.
Why Education is Important to Me

by Guillermo Martinez

I started my English classes at the Literacy Center about two years ago. The process is really slow because it is not easy to learn a new language. My wife has helped me a lot. She helps me with homework and pronunciation. She practices with me. She always says speaking in English is important to us.

English tutoring is helping me every day at work. I can have more conversations with my customers and give them better service. I am a waiter in a local Mexican restaurant.

I know that learning English is important. When my daughter grows up, she will need help with her homework. I really want to be able to help her.

Learning English will give me the tools to get a better job. Speaking English (and Spanish) is going to give me a good future, and my family will have one too.

I am thankful for what the Literacy Center and my tutor are doing for me and my family.
Wish our Wishes
by Ah Reum Hwang

Most Koreans like to “wish their wishes” on the first day of the New Year. Although the sun rises every morning, on this morning people like to clear their old behavior and make a new hope for the New Year. So, on the last day of the old year, people go to the sea or to the mountains. When the sun comes up, they whisper their hopes staring at the sun.

In Korea, I usually did that with my family. Two years before I moved to America, my family consisted of father, mother, brother and me. We went to the East Sea of Korea very early in the morning. We prayed for our hopes watching the rising sun… and ate great sushi in a restaurant where we could see a nice view.

Then my husband and I moved to America. This year was the first New Year for us in America, so we planned to go to Virginia Beach to see the sunrise and pray our wishes.

We left home at 4am and arrived at 7am. There were no crowds on the road or the beach. We walked into the sand and looked for a place where we could see the sunrise very well. We spread out our mat and sat down. We took several pictures with the background of the sea, and drank hot cocoa until the sunrise.

Finally, around 7:30, it was time. But all we saw were clouds. We waited: 7:45…8:00. Clouds. We were about to leave the beach, dragging with disappointment.

All of a sudden, my husband Kee shouted, “Hey, there are dolphins!”
They were too far away for me to see them. Are those dolphins or waves? So, we ran down the seawall to the light house. At the end of the seawall by the light house, we watched a school of dolphins! They were swimming from the north, crossed slowly in front of us and disappeared to the south. After the dolphins passed by, another group of dolphins came along. It seemed like a family at play. They jumped above the water showing their beautiful curve, stayed under the water for a few minutes and then appeared further to the south side. Their behavior was so smooth and was so beautiful. For 30 minutes, we saw many dolphins in the wild, not in an aquarium!

And we also prayed while the dolphins made their beautiful crossing.

We thought that we would get big luck by watching that family of dolphins rather than looking at the sunrise. With this great experience, my husband and I decided to live happily this year.
There is a woman. She is the greatest. There is a woman. She is the most amazing. There is a woman who is the most industrious. There is a woman. She is the most carefree. Who is she? She is my mother.

My mother is 85 years old. She was a doctor, but twenty-five years ago, she retired. She loves her children very much and her children love her very much, too. She is like all mothers. When we were young saplings, she was like our gardener. She would carefully prune us and take care of us so that we could become towering trees. When times would get difficult, only a few mothers chose to go forward rather than to retreat.

My mother is one of those mothers. She looks like an average person, but underneath there is an extraordinary heart. She was an indispensable person for us on our path of growth. She taught us a lot. She gave us the confidence to believe in ourselves in the face of difficulties. She taught us how to connect with people and become whatever we wanted.

In the hustle and bustle of the city, she was so small. She would
get up early every day to make us breakfast so that we would not be late for school. Every day, she did a lot of housework as well. With the passage of time, she became unaware of the wrinkles that climbed up her face. Her beautiful black hair is also slowly becoming gray. But in my eyes, she is still the most beautiful of all. In my eyes, my mother is a very strong woman. She can take hardships that others can’t and do what other women cannot do. This is my mother, an extraordinary mother.

Banana Beer

by Esther Manireze

In Africa, we like bananas. We cook them. We eat them. And we drink them.

We make banana juice and banana beer.

You cut the peels. You pound them for 30 minutes. Drink the juice. In two days, it is beer.

Esther and her husband Jeremiah.
LIFE is something that you can’t control.  
It’s the here and now.  
We need to grab a hold of it.  
We don’t know what will happen in our short lives.  
We can choose what we decide to wear each day.  

But LIFE is not the same.  
Some people say that LIFE is short.  
So enjoy each day. Eat, laugh, drink and love.  
It’s important to think and live the right way.  

Everyone thinks differently.  
That’s what makes LIFE interesting.  
We have to work to live.  
But making lots of money isn’t enough.  
It will never bring you happiness.  

I think and believe that we all need to do what is right.  
To honor our parents, family and children.  
It’s also necessary in LIFE to believe and trust in God.  
In my country, there is a saying in Swahili.  
We say, “Kula kidogo ulale mapema.”  
Which means, “Eat less and go to sleep early.”  

Tomorrow is another day.
A Premonition

by Natalya Mitus

It was in my early childhood. I was about ten years old. I and my fifteen-year-old sister went to the field of herding cows. Our parents were farmers. They had cows. Several families collected their cows together and grazed them in turn. This day was the turn of our family.

It was an early morning. The dawn was beautiful. The sky was clear. We took food and drove the cows to the field. When we came to the place, we settled in a small forest. Cows grazed right there in the field. We arranged a romantic breakfast in the open air. Everything was amazing.

But in the afternoon we saw on the horizon a small cloud. It was advancing rapidly and covered the whole sky. A thunderstorm began. Thunder rumbled. Lightning flashed. It was raining heavily. We became very scared. Near us there was a huge haystack. We ran there and sat down under this stack. Suddenly I had a very strong premonition. I was scared at heart. I said to my sister, “Let’s get out of here.” We got up and moved to another place. A few minutes later, the place where we sat before was struck by lightning. The hay caught fire. And we sat and watched it.

We saw on the road a racing motorcycle. It was our parents hurrying to help us. Their clothes were absolutely wet. But they did not pay attention to that. They were very scared for us.

We did not tell them about the fact that a few minutes ago we were sitting at the place lightning struck, and where the hay was now burning. They only learned about this a few years later.

So my premonition saved our lives.
I am a bamboo from a canebrake, from Persia’s homeland, full of colors. Variety of people and cultures of the arts. One day, somebody cut me, from my long green body and my roots. I cried and cried ‘til I was dry.

He was a shepherd on my land, I was the flute in his hand. He was happy, and I sad. I am from farmland, full of colors. White, brown, yellow, river, and sky blue. Winter, summer, fall, I slept over his heart with him.

Yes, he made a flute from my body, he made many holes, and I became a “Nay la bak.”* I became a part of his life. He plays excellent songs all day. It gives energy, happiness to the people, but Nobody knows what is happening in my heart.

I am from a canebrake. The boy’s beautiful songs are my sorrow. “Bamboo, be ambitious,” says my mind.

*Nay la bak: Little bamboo flute.
Inspired by the poetry of Rumi (Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Balkhi) Thank you, Victoria, Nicolas and Philip, for helping me to edit.
Education, My Best Inheritance
by Yolanda Perez

I was born in Pedernales, a town on the northwest coast of the Dominican Republic. It is a heavenly place with friendly and courteous people. I grew up with loving people and neighbors as family.

My parents did not reach a high level of education, but they made every effort for us and got it. My mother told us to study because education is the best inheritance that one can leave children. She was my biggest inspiration to study. She made bakery studies by correspondence because there was no school for 250 miles. And she set up the only pastry shop in the town and its surroundings. At the age of 70 years old, she was the director of a labor school in the country’s capital (Santo Domingo). She continued to study several courses such as: customer service, etiquette and protocol, several specialties in design and decoration for special cakes, and at an advanced age began to study oil painting. In her graduation, her godfather was the Mayor of the city of Santo Domingo and famous merengue artist, Johnny Ventura.

Thanks to her inspiration and example of effort and love for education, I graduated with a Bachelor of Theology and Bachelor of Business Administration. It was this degree that opened the doors for me to live permanently in the United States. Thanks to my mother’s motivation for painting, my daughter began to paint with her, and
my daughter embraced the same love for art. Today my daughter is studying art at PVCC.

I accepted an invitation from a friend to arrive in Ruckersville, VA to spend a vacation. It was there that I attended the Church of God Luz y Vida and was offered to pastor the church that had been two years without a pastor. I accepted, knowing that it was God’s purpose for me since God gave me signs of this task before coming here. For six years I have been pastoring the Luz y Vida Church, and it is glory to God to see how a church that was almost extinct can be reborn. Thus, everything in life can be achieved with love, dedication and effort. I know that I would never have been able to take this position without all the opportunities that God gave me in life to learn and relate to Him more. That is why I thank God for giving me some extraordinary parents who left me the greatest legacy so I could receive a good education.

Framboyan Tree
By Teotiste Guerrero, Yolanda’s mother
I lived at Hollymead for almost four years before I moved out. I had many neighbors. Michael was one of them. Michael lived on the first floor of an apartment and I lived on the second floor.

I thought Michael was a very good person even when I didn’t know him. I saw him often sweep the public sidewalk and the front of the public trash boxes.

There were many cats in our community. Michael loved them so much. He took a bag of cat food across the parking lots almost every morning to feed the cats. He told me that the cats were in a storm drain.

In front of Michael’s door, there were always a few so beautiful and different color cats. They laid down or squatted near his door. Sometimes even one cat would like to go upstairs with me!

Michael spent $300 or more than $300 to buy the food for those cats every month. But he said happily, “I have enough money to do it!”
Every Spring break, my daughter, Nicole, and I have the tradition of taking a trip together — just the two of us.

This year, we went to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to visit my nephews, Eliel and Daniel. We all spontaneously decided to drive four and a half hours to Niagara Falls.

We had an amazing day at Niagara Falls even though it snowed and we were freezing.

We started back about 6:00pm, and drove for one and a half hours in the dark. Suddenly all the lights went out and the car stopped in the road. It would not start, so my nephews got it to the side of the road. Then we called their insurance company. We waited and waited for over an hour, but they couldn’t find our location or help us.

Suddenly, Nicole said, “Why don’t we call the police at 911?” The local police answered right away. They were so kind and wanted to make sure that we were safe and asked what we wanted: chargers or a tow truck or a hotel or food or blankets?? They never asked about our immigration status or nationality. They only wanted to help us.

In 20 minutes the tow truck came and put our car on the bed of
the truck. We got in the cab with the short spoken driver. Soon he got us to the All Night Walmart. My nephews thought the car just needed a new battery, but we didn't know for sure. Otherwise, we'd have to find a motel and maybe be stuck there for days while they fixed the car.

So Daniel bought a battery and the Walmart mechanic put it in easily. I turned the key and everything started.

We were back at my nephews' house by three in the morning.

So the lesson for us was Call the Police, don't feel afraid, don't wait. They were so kind and really helped us to get home.

The Boyfriends
by Remberto Cruz Mejia

They had boyfriends behind my Aunt Mother's back. My Aunt Mother questioned me, "Did you see anybody with Imelda and Magdalena?" I told her, "I didn't see anybody." She knew I was not telling the truth. So I brought her a big stick, a belt, or some reins and she punished me on my legs, my back and everywhere. When Imelda and Magdalena heard that I had covered for them, they said, "We are so, so sorry."

The next time my Aunt Mother asked about the boyfriends, I remembered my punishment and I said, "Yes, the boyfriends are looking for them." My Aunt Mother didn't punish me, but Imelda and Magdalena did. The problem for me was that I couldn't make everyone happy. I could not win. I was about eight years old.
My Life with My Family
by Deo Rai

We’re four in my family. We live in Charlottesville, Virginia. My husband works at the hospital. We have two kids, one son and one daughter. Our son goes to school. He studies in sixth grade. Our daughter goes to school. She studies in second grade. I work at home, cook food and wash clothes, everything.

I like to cook different kinds. I make breakfast in the morning. I make lunch at afternoon, and I make dinner. I cook three times, preparing food for my family. I can make Nepali food: chicken fry, vegetables fry, and fish fry. I can make Momo and Somasa.

I work at home. I mop the floor and clean the kitchen. I clean the bathroom and windows. I go to the laundromat once a week. I clean the bedroom. I help my daughter clean her room. I can help my family.

In my free time, I am knitting sweaters and making things. I read English books. I try to write a family story.

We have a very difficult life because we’re poor. We moved to new country, America. Many people talk English, but we do not understand English language. We speak only Nepali. We come to ESL class to learn English. We slowly speak and read. Education is important because with no education, life is very difficult in U.S.
The Planet Earth
by Emelia Flores Remigio

We love you Planet Earth
You are LIFE
The silence, the light, the air and the water
You breathe oxygen into the creation of the oceans and the forests.

Oh, beautiful night and day
Greatness and melancholy
Only you give the changes of seasons and weather
And remain the lover of climate and its power.

Our Planet Earth is a wonder
A beautiful and huge house for all creation
We should protect and restore it with happiness and kindness
For all its majestic ecosystems.

We humans are brothers and caretakers
Of this holy Planet Earth
You give us your sweet abundance
And we should all give you our thanks.
What is happening now is that I am learning a lot. Before I came to the U.S., I was born in a bamboo hut in a jungle in Burma. We grew our own rice and corn. We relied a lot on the buffalo to help work the farm. Nobody taught me about how to learn and to have a better life. I was 19 years old. We lived in the jungle where there were no cities, electricity, bicycles, shoes or cars. We never saw these things. We never saw anything in the dark because we had no lights.

There was a problem. The military said we could not stay in the jungle. They told us we had to move to the city. But some people didn’t want to. So, we ran away to Thailand. We became refugees. I became a man without a country.

For the first time in my life I found out what a school was. In the
refugee camp I started taking adult learning classes once a week. I was learning Burmese, English and Karenni for the first time. Finally, I was learning how to read and write. Whenever I saw someone reading or writing something in camp I asked them to teach me what they knew. The most important thing to me at the refugee camp was getting educated and finding a better life for myself and my growing family.

I lived in the crowded camp for ten long years. I heard someone talking about going to the U.S. Many of us applied to go there and in about one year I settled in Charlottesville, VA, with my Burmese wife and two young sons.

After I was here for 6 months I started my first job and have it up until now. Two more children joined our family, another son and a daughter. They are Americans. My three sons go to school. One in middle school, one in elementary school and one in preschool. I hope the children will have a better future as they are learning at a much younger age than I did.

So how is life different from Burma? For 30 years I walked everywhere. Everyday I saw big, high mountains. I went to the river to bathe. We had no soap. Instead we used the seed from a tree to rub ourselves.

In Charlottesville the mountains are much shorter and taking a shower is easy because the water is in my house. Also different is the cooking. Before we
cooked with a fire and here it is easier to use an electric stove. We don’t grow our own food, like in Burma, but we go to the local park, we go to school, we drive an old car, listen to music and have two cell phones.

Now I learn English one night a week at Literacy Volunteers. My children started school when they were very young. Then they can get better jobs or even a job as a manager. It seems like the boss does little work and gets much money.

I am no longer a man without a country. I became an official citizen of the United States in 2016 and am proud to call the U.S. our home. I also registered to vote.

Life is much easier for us in Virginia.

Most importantly, I want to thank the kind volunteers who patiently taught me English and how to read and write. Also how to talk to the people in the stores, at work, and with my new friends.
Be Proactive
by Suely Catta-Preta

I arrived in the USA in 1995. I moved to this country because my husband was invited to work with a company that produced holograms.

My English at that time was very basic; I started learning English at the Jefferson School Center, where I continue practicing my communication skills.

When you are from another country it is very important to become part of many groups and organizations that are here to help you in many ways to improve your proficiency in English.

The Literacy Volunteers organization is offering the opportunity to you, through instruction by a tutor, to develop in many areas of learning.

My personal experience with my tutor has been helpful and rich in different aspects of acquiring knowledge.

I’m growing as a student in different subjects such as gardening, cooking, music, grammar, literature, art, writing, vocabulary and cultural relationships.

If you are here, there are many resources available to you.

Don’t be shy - the community is here to help you to embrace the culture and be a productive American citizen.
A Memory of My Grammy

by Edilma Reyes Martinez

Today I’m going to tell something about when I was a little girl.

I remember that I liked the arrival of Christmas Day at my grandmother’s house because on December 24th all the family came to Grandma’s house in the mountains. On this day, my mom, my aunts and my grandmothers from very early on began to prepare food. I loved everything they prepared, but one special dessert was the buñuelos with sweet cinnamon liquid. The ingredients were flour and tomatoes for the buñuelos. And for the cinnamon sweet liquid, the ingredients were water, cinnamon sticks, and piloncillo (brown sugar cane).

To prepare the buñuelos, the tomatoes were peeled and the seeds were removed. After that, the tomatoes were put in a blender to liquefy them.

Then the liquefied tomatoes were mixed with the flour and kneaded. They let the mix stand for two hours, and then they made the buñuelos large and thin, and they fried them.

To prepare for the sweet cinnamon liquid, they put everything
together in the pot and they boiled it to make the warm cinnamon liquid.

When the buñuelos and the sweet cinnamon liquid were ready, the sweet cinnamon liquid was served in small bowls and the buñuelos were broken into small pieces, put into the bowls, and were ready to eat. Delicious!

I loved this dessert. For me, it was one of the things I liked the most. Of all the things Grammy prepared on this date, it was my favorite.

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Chinese Lunar New Year
by Yan Lin

Chinese New Year is an ancient Chinese tradition that has evolved over thousands of years of cultural development, and is the most important holiday of the year.

One tradition is sweeping the household. At the end of the Lunar Year, the household is thoroughly swept and cleaned to symbolically cleanse the soul and home of the past year’s disappointments and failures, and to make room for the ambitions of the coming year.

Another tradition is hanging up paper cuttings. Intricate designs are made to hang up. Paper cutting is an intricate art form in China, dating back many years. Firecrackers are also set off by every family to bring about a cheerful and festive spirit, and to ward off evil ghosts.

On the first day of the festivities, people dress up in their best clothes and visit their neighbors, extending a traditional New Year’s greeting. Children greet their elders first, wishing them good health and
prosperity. Elders are expected to give red envelopes with cash to the kids, supposedly to bring them further luck later on in life.

A New Year’s dinner is also an important and cheerful time for every family to bond. Traditional foods vary by location. Dumplings are common in the North, because they resemble blocks of gold circulated in the Chinese economy, and represent good financial fortune. Southerners eat sticky buns because the word for them in Chinese sounds like the word for “year,” and involves a Chinese pun about Chinese New Years.
Living in Different Cultures
by Esther Umuhoza Bagaza

How Immigrant Children Can Become More Successful in School

Living in this country is a big opportunity and a big privilege to ourselves and to our children. There are many challenges as an immigrant living in a different culture. One challenge is helping our children with school work. Some parents have never been to school and even for those who have been to school, it’s still difficult.

I’m always thinking about how to support my kids to become more successful. It’s not easy to raise my kids in a new culture different than how I grew up. For example, technology advances quickly here and some of us didn’t grow up with technology.

This is how I think I can help my kids! I can help them with homework after school, if I can understand it. I can take them to the library so they can read books. Also, I can find activities after school like sports and other games they like to play. Some of us don’t have much time to help our kids because we have hard jobs and we get home exhausted.

Even though it’s hard, we should try our best. Any small thing you do to help can make a difference. So, my husband and I started a nonprofit called Open Gate Ministries to make sure no immigrant children are left behind in our community.
Where is Nicole?
by Lourdes Pineda

Several years ago, my family and I had a beautiful vacation. We had a plan to visit cities in different states, and reunite in Maryland at my sister’s house. We all met there with the rest of my family.

All my brothers and sisters with their children came there to celebrate the 4th of July, American Independence Day! We had heard about this beautiful and fun holiday. We wanted to see how America celebrates outside with picnics and fireworks.

The children were excited to stay together in one house, with all the children and adults, 30 people. My sister had prepared for a long time to have so many people in her house. Her neighbor lent her empty house for some of the family to stay in. Latin families love to be together. We like to laugh, eat, talk and sometimes even fight. We always stay near or in the same house. It is inconsiderate and a snub to stay in a hotel.

Finally, the 4th of July arrived. Everybody was excited to celebrate independence day of this beautiful nation for the first time. The day was sunny and hot. We packed snacks, water, and a blanket. We took the train from Rockville, MD to Washington DC.

When we arrived in DC, we started to look for a good place to pass the day. To our surprise, the mall was full, though we thought we were early. Finally we found a place, not near the stage but good enough to see the show. We arrived at noon, so everyone was hungry. We started to eat the snacks and soon the food was all gone.

The music was fabulous. The Army Band was playing American
favorites. We saw people dancing around us.

When it was about 3:00pm in the afternoon, we were really hungry, but we had eaten all our food. We were drooling, because everyone around us was eating delicious food, cheese, wine, crackers. The nearest place for food was three blocks away.

The children played around us. They looked for shade because the sun was so hot. We got sunburned like at the beach.

Soon, the older kids wanted to go closer to the band. My little 8-year-old Nicole asked me, “Mama, can I go see with them too?” I said yes. Thirty minutes later, I looked everywhere - no Nicole!

We asked everyone where is Nicole? Nicole was lost in a crowd of a million people. We made search teams to look at the places she could be. After several minutes of looking for Nicole, I felt like I had a panic attack, my heart was beating so fast like I had run a marathon. I was so scared and mad at Nicole.

We heard an announcement, but since we didn’t understand English, we didn’t pay attention to it. My daughter Alejandra said, “Mami, I think they’re talking about a lost girl.” We said, “That must be Nicole.”

We went to the stage and there was Nicole! We were so excited to
see her again. My brave daughter had asked the staff to help her. The waiting was short for Nicole, but forever for us.

After many years of marriage and five children, this was the first time we lost a child. This was not our day!

After the sun went down, the fireworks started. It was a fabulous show. We so enjoyed watching all the people enjoy the show.

At the end of the show, we wanted to stay together when we walked to the train station. We made a human train with 30 adults and children in order of size. We sang children’s songs and popular Spanish songs. Everybody looked at us and applauded the children. Everyone was very friendly.

On the way back on the train, the little kids slept and the rest of us told the story about how Nicole had gotten lost. We were so happy to return with everyone together.

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Thank You
by Yolanda Perez

Favor is paid with favor. So we say in my country when someone helps us, because there is no monetary sum that can quantify the value of a favor. Just gratitude and return it with another good.

The first most difficult thing to be in a foreign place is the absence of your family. There are only two places where you can feel yourself, at home and at church. When I arrived in Charlottesville in 2011, I found a family in Covenant Church. Being in Covenant Church was like being at home. Pastor Bare was like that father figure I grew up with, and
Laila, his wife, was the inspiration like my mother to me. I love watching Laila those last few minutes of the sermon playing the piano, like the instrumental music we heard at home during lunch. And I share with her a passion for teaching.

The second most difficult thing is the language. It is frustrating when you cannot understand or be understood when communicating. I made many efforts to expand my knowledge of English, but my knowledge was very scarce. I understood immediately that to establish myself here would demand I learn the language. It was not an option, but an imperative.

With my children in high school and a future at college or university and me working with an English-speaking staff, I had no other choice. I needed to find someone with enough patience to teach me to speak English. That’s why I needed help. That’s what I found at Literacy Volunteers.

When I got the assignment for my English tutor, I received a favor never before received. Teaching is hard work. Natalie Detert has been a great help to me on this path to learning the English language. On many occasions, people think that the good things that happen in our lives are just simple events or unimportant. In a world so egocentric and increasingly insecure, it is very difficult to find help. Everything good is dignified and carries with it a great merit. Every generous person is a servant of good and a loyal citizen directs the fate of his country and makes his city a safe and pleasant place to live in.
About Moving to Charlottesville
by Li Zhang

Before I decided to move from my country to Charlottesville, I didn’t research much about this place. One of my friends who used to study at UVa recommended a high school for my eldest daughter, Jackie, and it sounded okay. Therefore, we decided to come here.

The first time we were here was March of 2016. Jackie needed to attend an interview at that school. That was not a good time in Charlottesville, maybe the worst time during the whole year: cold, raining, no green leaves and no sun. Everything looked gray, and this town was totally different from the big, crowded city I lived in before. The first impression was not so good, but Jackie got the offer easily, so we came here without hesitation.

Moving is always hard, especially when you don’t understand their language, but I thought I did a good job. Everything went smoothly as planned. I didn’t even miss an exit when I drove from Dulles Airport to Charlottesville in the middle of the night with our eight big suitcases and my three sleepy passengers – my two daughters and my mom.
I always wanted to brag about my moving stories with my friends, which included moving three times in two months. The first time is moving from my country to a Charlottesville Airbnb house. I was elated when my friends admired what I did.

But there were still some things I didn’t talk about with my friends. The most difficult part was still language. At first when I needed to communicate with others, I relied mostly on random sign language. Even speaking to the cashier at the supermarket was a challenge. Therefore, I usually chose the self-checkout machines. I would not check out with a cashier unless I absolutely had to. I always mixed up my first and last name, and thus, I always practiced introducing myself too much. This caused me to be anxious about everything. I would feel nervous weeks before a parent-teacher meeting, and I was always afraid to take calls. If my daughter was not home, then I would simply let the phone ring.

Things began to change half a year ago when I started learning English in Literacy Volunteers Learning Center, and class by class, my English gradually started to improve. My teacher said, “Language is just a tool. If you use it, then you will control it. Do not hesitate, do not fear, speak your thoughts loudly, and you will achieve your goals.” She continuously encourages me to read, speak, and write. It’s true, through the six months of learning, I have settled down and gained confidence in English. Taking calls is no longer a pain. I hope to continue to improve and learn.
I joined the Mexican Army in 1993 when I was very young. When I started, most recruits said to me, “What are you doing here? You can’t do this kind of work. You’re too young and too short. This work is very hard.” But I said, “Don’t worry about me. I want to stay here.” Everybody looked at me when I said, “I want to serve in the Mexican Army.”

My Captain looked right at me. Then he said, “Get out of here! You should never be in the Army!” I felt very bad. Then he said, “I will give you a test. If you pass this test, I will let you stay.” The Captain grabbed a large stick and told me to turn around. He whipped me five times on my back! When he finished, he asked me if I was okay. I said, “I’m okay…no problem.” Even though it hurt, I did not yell, scream or show him that it was painful. The Captain then said, “Alright, you can stay in the Army.”

This time, I was really ready to train and to serve my country. I had heard that everyone respects soldiers and the hard work that they do.

I did many physical exercises and even learned karate. I also learned how to box.

Finally I became a soldier, a short one, but a respected one.
Television became available in my city Goonbad Kavoos, Iran, almost 50 years ago. Obviously, TV is useful, but it can also be harmful. I saw TV for the first time in my uncle’s home. At that time, this invention was forbidden for most religious people including my family because it shows images and has inconsistent teachings for the Turkmen people. After a few years, the TV became usual among the educated people like my uncle. Now, I understand what effects and changes this magic box made in the small Turkmen community of Iran. Before, there was less awareness of different ways of living. Then, year by year, our traditional activities and culture changed: storytelling, the Turkmen language, and consumerism of modern amenities.

First of all, our traditional storytelling turned to watching TV. Before TV, the Turkmen lifestyle was a little bit primitive and extremely traditional. We had radios and record players that ran on batteries, but there was no source of electricity, so we could not watch TV. Almost every day, after we finished homework, Mom would tell us a story that she heard from her mother. Sometimes my siblings and I asked questions about the story, but now after 40 years, I know why when the light of the oil lamp slowly became weak, the story was over, because the fuel was running out.

When my uncle bought a TV, we wanted to go to my uncle’s home to watch it. In fact, during the week, our minds were on film and television series. It was so tough because two or three times at
night we were knocking on my uncle’s door, and we were scared to bother them. After we had bought a TV, my mom’s lovely stories were forgotten and became annoying to us. Now we are so sorry because the TV made us lose a part of our culture.

The influence of TV changed the Turkmen language by adding many words from Farsi. Before TV, we spoke purely Turkmen language, but now hundreds of other Farsi words have entered the Turkmen language like: perhaps, maybe, by the way, suddenly, swear, God, pen, pencil, and book. After the Iranian revolution in 1979, one of the Turkmen’s demands of the new government was to teach our native language which has made significant changes to the Turkmen lifestyle. After 37 years of revolution, the government has not only allowed teaching the Turkmen language, but has also lifted other restrictions such as freedom of job movement that had been imposed on the Turkmen people. Today, most Iranian Turkmen protect their native language and have become interested in radio and television programming from Turkmenistan and Turkey.

Finally, the impact of television is not limited only to changing traditions and language; it has also encouraged people to consume modern amenities. Before TV, they did not know about modern life nor have experience about social awareness. For example, they knew
only about eating food with their hands, sitting and sleeping on the floor, and washing clothes and dishes with some of the same water. Gradually, spoons, forks, armchairs, sofas, beds and tables entered their homes, and then, a large variety of detergents and cleaners came into use. Prior to TV, I saw my mom and grandmother wash their hair with yogurt and traditional soaps. Since TV, we waste electricity and our money, and our health has declined. We are too sedentary and stay up too late.

To sum up, TV changed a part of our Turkmen culture. It changed our traditional activities and language, and motivated us to consume more goods. Because it brought a lot of negative culture into the Turkmen community, we should be revising the Farsi programs to include more Turkmen language programs, decreasing our viewing time, and learning about our Turkmen culture to achieve peace and a satisfying life.
My name is Chanpen Jhoeykaew. I came from Thailand to the U.S.A. in 2014. I recently got married to Dana Lord. My name will soon change to Chanpen Lord. He and his family are from the U.S.A. They have really welcomed me into the family.

I miss my family in Thailand very much and I pray for my family every day. I believe that one day my husband and I will be happy with my family when we visit them in Thailand. My husband and I hope to bring my two sons to the U.S.A. one day.

I have worked at the ‘Monsoon Siam’ Thai restaurant in Charlottesville, Virginia for almost three years. I am the Appetizer Chef there.

I like to cook for my husband. He really likes my mansaman curry. I like to sing songs and dance the sumba for exercise. I like to keep the house clean so the house looks nice.

One day I hope to be fluent in English. That is why I come to the Literacy Program at the Jefferson School. I want to be a good student. I want to be able to speak good English with my friends and family and with all English speaking people.

Thank you to everyone who reads my story.
I have lived in Charlottesville for eleven months. I am 18 years old. I lived in Mexico in my childhood next to my parents who always cared for me. I have five brothers. I love my family in Mexico.

I studied only at high school, but now I am studying to learn English, so I can live better in the U.S.A. On Sundays, I spend the company of two sisters I have here, and my nephews also. I have a brother in North Carolina, and the other part of my family is in Mexico. I miss them a lot.

My family supports me a lot to get ahead and become better. Now, all the immigrants who live in the U.S.A. are nervous because politicians support the President and what he says about the people of Mexico and the rules he wants to make about immigration. I hope that when my work permit expires, I can renew it.