



Learning the Language: Hundreds Eager to Gain English Fluency By Joy Brown

Approximately 20 international adult newcomers and some of their family members were gathered one warm September morning at Mission Possible. This Findlay-based Christian organization operates schools in Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Striving to learn English, they worked in small groups and one-on-one with English-speaking tutors trained through the Findlay-Hancock County Public Library's Read for Life literacy program. Many students had just wrapped up physically demanding third-shift work at regional manufacturing centers, choosing to come straight to tutoring instead of heading to bed.

Tired, students bent over workbooks, practiced speaking in English, and listened intently as tutors explained the linguistic intricacies of a language that many U.S.-born citizens often fail to grasp. Yet, rather than frustration, a sense of determination pervaded the room. No matter how exhausted they were and how confusing the lessons might have been, quitting, it seemed, was not an option.

Instead, those who were asked about their circumstances expressed hope and gratitude for the very basics they have.

"Here, I can sleep and not worry," said Augustine (not his real name), a Haitian refugee who said he entered the country under "the Biden protection program" (the Humanitarian Parole Program, initiated by President Joe Biden, that started accepting Haitians in 2023).

"When you try to sleep in Haiti, you hear every sound" because one of those sounds could signal serious danger, particularly from gangs, he explained.

Married for nine years, Augustine and his wife, their 4-year-old son, and a friend have lived in a room at one of the hotels on Findlay's west side for about six months. The couple work full-time at a manufacturing plant in Findlay and Augustine has a second part-time job at a distribution center. He's hoping his wages will one day pay for the family to move into an apartment and help him find doctors who can treat him for a head injury he incurred when his family's roof fell on

top of them during one of the destructive hurricanes that ripped through Haiti. Such medical care, he said, is enormously expensive in his home country.

Although working as a laborer here, Augustine had been a construction worker in Haiti who made enough to make ends meet for a time. When the work dried up because of gang disruption, and when the violence became too much, he fled to the United States. His professional goal is to earn a civil engineering degree, he said. Thus, along with assisting with the basics of navigating daily life here, learning English is an educational investment that Augustine hopes will pay off in the long run.

The lessons aren't easy.

For instance, how can something other than a piece of cake be a piece of cake?
Do people actually hand over one of their arms and a leg to pay for an item?
And what is this gruesome business about killing two birds with one stone?

Idioms, quirky figures of speech that appear in languages throughout the world, are some of the most difficult concepts to grasp when learning English. Kristy Szkudlarek knows about it, given her significant experience teaching English as the Read for Life coordinator.

"Idioms are very hard, but I love talking about them. We talked about idioms in our weather lesson, about it raining cats and dogs," said Szkudlarek.

Established in 1987 by the Findlay Service League, Read for Life offers tutoring to adults who are unable to read or have limited reading skills. The program has typically helped people seeking their high school equivalencies who want to land jobs and are targeting other ways to improve their lives. Now, it is also serving several international newcomers like Augustine—non-English speakers or those with limited English skills—who realize that learning English is a key component to succeeding in this country.

Along with learning at the library, Read for Life participants are also learning English through volunteers from five partner organizations throughout the community, which includes Mission Possible. Szkudlarek recently shared with business leaders during a Findlay-Hancock County Chamber of Commerce event that about 145 students are now receiving weekly instruction focused on literacy and life skills. For instance, participants aren't just learning how to read the word "dose" and what it means, but how to interpret consumption instructions on a bottle of aspirin.

The Read for Life webpage explains that "each student is given books and materials to work in the area matched to his/her own needs and abilities. Tutors can help students with reading, math, writing, social studies, English as a second language, high school equivalency, and citizenship."

Read for Life trains anyone who wishes to become a tutor.

During a Sept. 11 outreach class at Mission Possible, students were split into small groups based on their skill levels.

In a beginner group, students were learning how to compare phone, gasoline, and housing costs in Haiti with the United States. They were also considering which “costs more” here—private school versus public education.

A more advanced group of three students discussed what it means to “be an empathetic listener” and how to be healthy. Pronunciations of the long ‘l’ sound and how to formulate a ‘j’ sound were also reviewed.

What Sept. 11 means to Americans was a key discussion point that morning, too.

“Our community partners are playing a huge role in tutoring,” said Szkudlarek, whose extensive outreach is widely recognized by the local service community as occupying the nexus of international newcomer assistance. Making vital connections, both on the page and throughout the population, is a talent that Szkudlarek is continuously cultivating.

Evidence of Szkudlarek’s passion for helping others in this way and for serving the region’s increasingly diverse residents is packed into the library’s Read for Life room. On numerous shelves sit plastic vegetables, empty medicine bottles with labels, books that “talk” in multiple languages, purchased with a Findlay-Hancock County Community Foundation grant; and hundreds of traditional books. The walls are adorned with maps with push-pins indicating where learners originally came from. There are toys and Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library books for students who bring their children.

When a newcomer signs up for tutoring, where do they begin? How do they break the ice, so to speak? Many teachers emphasize that learning English, especially as an adult, is not a piece of cake.

“We start with basic conversations, like names and introductions,” Szkudlarek said. The conversations move on to universal identifications of things such as fruit, colors, and body parts. “We find other common connections to talk about,” she said; for instance, holidays are typically a conversational hit.

Szkudlarek said food has served as an important connection point. During a time when racist tropes have resurfaced and been politically amplified regarding what international residents eat, Read for Life has collected traditional recipes from students that reflect what they cooked in their home countries, and she has shared some typical American recipes, too. Some potlucks have been held.

More recently, Szkudlarek, in partnership with the University of Findlay and its international student, faculty, and staff population, launched Passport Picnic. Open to the community and

offered monthly, Passport Picnic is an opportunity for people to learn about different cultures and their cuisines. The first picnic in September spotlighted Iraq. Countries such as India, Japan, and Haiti will also be highlighted.

Additionally, the library offers a monthly Speak Easy “English as a second language conversation club” that also welcomes Hancock Public Health’s mobile health clinic and speakers from various community organizations who provide information about their services.

Szkudlarek didn’t initially set out to become a literacy specialist. Instead, her background is in broadcast telecommunications. However, her affinity for effective and creative communication still shines through in her current work. She offers her students the opportunity to handwrite notes in a scrapbook she keeps which shows how impactful learning English is.

“Thank you very much for helping me learn classes were very enjoyable.” “Thank you for work and you love everyone. Te Amamos muito.” “It was a wonderful class I appreciate the way you teach us it was a big pleasure to have a good teacher like you!” some students wrote.

“When I’m here, I have many friends who died in Haiti,” Augustine said, telling part of his story as a means to practice speaking English. “My friend, his wife, their two children – gangs killed them.”

“There is no peace in Haiti anywhere,” said Julien (not his real name), who was in the same learning group as Augustine and earned a civil engineering degree while in Haiti.

“Here, the community has provided us with everything we need. We are very thankful for the support and help we’ve received,” said Julien.

Yet, as much as newcomers such as Augustine and Julien are striving to assimilate, their wish when conditions are safe enough, is to one day return home.

“Once the situation is better in Haiti, we will go back,” said Augustine.

How can the situation get better, they were asked.

“Only God can do that,” said Julien.