



Translators Helping Migrants Move from Daily Survivor Mode to Sustainable Self-Sufficiency By Joy Brown

What is he saying? Why are sirens blaring outside on a sunny morning? Why are newcomers at a nearby apartment complex hanging outside all the time? What's the point of stocking up on food for a week?

Understanding what people are saying can be difficult even for those fluent in the language used. The most helpful language translators will decode language in the literal sense and help people decipher the meaning of what is being said. Explaining people's actions, intentions, and expectations translates to knowledge, rich with rhetorical and symbolic significance, that can be life-changing.

Findlay, Ohio residents Hachemy Gabriel and his wife, Rene Gabriel, know this first-hand. They know how to explain to alarmed immigrants that what they hear in the city on the first Tuesday morning of each month does not indicate imminent danger, but tornado siren tests. They know that it's important for U.S.-born citizens to know that Haitians are used to living and working outside, given the country's tropical climate and general lack of air conditioning, which is why they prefer to socialize outdoors. And they realize that Haitians aren't used to buying food that'll last an entire week, in part because refrigeration in their home country is rare, so, a daily visit to the market was instead the norm.

Different languages, cultures, lifestyles, and perceptions can make for challenging circumstances for newcomers and longstanding citizens alike. We don't know what we don't know. That's why the Gabriels, particularly in the past few years, have emerged as key community service providers with uniquely helpful backgrounds, skills, and astute answers.

Hachemy is a successful entrepreneur whose business has exploded in popularity because of the influx of international newcomers to the region within the past two years. There are few translators within the area, let alone those who are fluent in both Haitian Creole and English. His company, Empowering Integration Solutions (EIS), offers language translation and cultural interpretation. Hachemy, who is from Haiti, is fluent in Haitian Creole, which is notoriously difficult to learn and translate; English; and French. Rene, from Arlington, Ohio, is the public

relations coordinator for Mission Possible, a Findlay-based Christian nonprofit that operates schools in Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

The couple met about a decade ago through Mission Possible. Drawn by the country's extreme need and a keen desire to help, Rene embarked on her first mission trip to Haiti in 2012. "There are people who suffer more than I could ever imagine," she said. Her mission work continued because of those people, whom she described as possessing little but who are vibrant and eager to share what little they have, even with strangers like her. Hachemy was working for the organization as a sponsorship assistant. Kind, patient, and shy, Rene noticed him immediately.

"You just saw his heart right away," she said of Hachemy. "You saw his heart for welcoming the teens, and the kids were drawn to him, but he also had what was very much like a leadership role, and he took that seriously. There was a good mix of compassion for the people around him but also responsibility."

Now married, with two children, the Gabriels are continuing to open their hearts to those from faraway lands. Other regional service providers have identified migrants from Haiti as some of the people who are most in need of basics such as affordable housing, warm winter clothing, and, of course, someone who can decipher the new language and culture that surrounds them. The Gabriels understand these needs and understand the poverty and gang violence that most Haitians are fleeing, having seen some of it first-hand and having connections with those directly impacted by it.

Mission Possible continues to offer financial support to schools it owns in Haiti, but its workers and volunteers have not traveled to the country for about four years because it is unsafe. Ironically, many Haitians are choosing to migrate to Findlay, where jobs are available, and their lives aren't always in danger. Most, if not all Haitians are arriving here as authorized immigrants under Temporary Protected Status, a government designation that allows people from certain countries to stay in the U.S. while they seek asylum. Therefore, the Gabriels are still helping Haitians, just in different ways.

Hachemy and Rene operate from an ethos of empowerment. Rather than simply helping those in need, they also strive to give individuals the means to help themselves.

"The Mission Possible Philosophy is hand up, not hand out. That's still the philosophy that we have... Let's teach them and equip them," said Rene. This mindset also aligns with EIS, which lists "core values" such as empowerment, inclusion, and collaboration as its driving forces.

The couple has been offering weekly English language classes at Mission Possible's Bigelow Avenue office. Learning the language is key to migrants succeeding here, they emphasize to newcomers. Many students arrive for morning classes after working third shifts at manufacturing centers, including one woman in her 70s who has been known to walk for an hour to get to the class (now that they know this, the Gabriels try to find her a ride each week).

Learning English is just one of the first steps toward achieving self-sufficiency. When it comes to truly understanding what others are saying, it can get more complicated. Hachemy said he takes pride in not only informing but in teaching about the unknowns to mitigate misunderstandings and stigma. His "office" has just as easily been a courtroom providing translation as it has the BMV deciphering paperwork and regulations for a confused newcomer.

He has provided cultural sensitivity training to the Findlay Police Department so that officers can better serve migrants and is an invaluable contributor to the region's Immigration Task Force which is collaboratively finding solutions to better assist them. This past summer he could be found helping at events such as the Summer Safaris, which is offered for newcomers of all nationalities—including Americans—services such as basic health screenings and information on English as a Second Language instruction; and the inaugural Haitian-Caribbean Festival hosted by Findlay's Black Heritage Library and Multicultural Center.

He is also in the process of working with local agencies and government officials to produce videos to help newcomers better understand U.S. living standards, laws, and expectations. Printed materials have been created, but are less useful for Haitians, Hachemy explained, because their culture is mostly oral. Learning happens more through hearing than through reading, hence, the reason many can seem loud and boisterous to U.S.-born people.

"They're a very loud culture, which surprised me at first," said Rene. "When they talk passionately, it sounds like they're yelling, like they're fighting."

The immediacy of day-to-day living, of survival, in a country where goods and service options are far different than in the U.S., not only results in energetic speaking but in different routines and lifestyles. Fresh food, for instance, is their only option; there is no such thing as leftovers. Therefore, to someone used to eating just-picked fruit and freshly caught seafood, items like instant mashed potatoes and snack cakes with a forever shelf-life often come as a culture shock. Not having to contend with bullets flying over one's head is a huge relief, but a life spent doing so doesn't lend itself well to planning, which is one reason why keeping appointments can be challenging for newcomers.

When U.S.-born residents such as property owners and employers don't know about these cultural differences, it's easy to simply make assumptions. Hachemy said he sometimes finds himself in the middle between migrants and U.S.-born individuals, having to interpret and translate for both. Sometimes he's compelled to offer economic details about why most Haitians send a large chunk of their earnings to their family members still in Haiti and how that practice contributes to the circular economy. Sometimes he encounters overt racism and must explain to a newcomer why they're being treated in a way that seems unfair.

It's a difficult job, but one that he knows is vital to the community and all residents.

Having been raised by a mother who greatly prized education, Hachemy and his six siblings went to school. He then worked for Mission Possible for about 10 years before identifying additional

professional goals. A random phone call seeking a translator sparked an interest in that field. He was fortunate in that many of his family members had moved to Florida; he initially stayed with them and earned a business degree here in the states.

A situation that brought Hachemy face to face with hardships that Haitian immigrants face in this country inspired him to think even more about the translation business. He drew up a multi-year business plan and launched EIS in August 2023.

Rene and Hachemy say they will always view their work not only as elevating for those in need but as reciprocal.

"There's a lot we can learn from them and there's a lot they can learn from us. I think sometimes we forget that it's a two-way street," said Rene.

Regional school districts are furthering this shared learning approach as well by hosting events with international themes and pairing migrant students with their U.S.-born counterparts for lessons and projects. For instance, students at Whittier Primary School in Findlay enjoy learning about classmates from other countries and their cultures through activities such as "Travel Tuesdays."

But in some respects, mutual understanding can be harder to attain when life circumstances differ so greatly.

For instance, in mountainous Haiti, because schools are so rare and the topography is so inhospitable, some students walk miles and go without food during the day for their education.

Here, there are different obstacles to learning. While Hachemy works with adults, Guidege "Guie" Miller works with Findlay City Schools (FCS) students, offering Haitian Creole translation and interpretation.

Guie was born in Brooklyn, New York but lived in Port au Prince, Haiti. Raised by two journalists whom she said, "view education as sacrosanct," she was formerly trained in French and English, and went on to earn a bachelor's degree in hospitality and strategic communication. For 12 years she worked for Marriott International, where she met her husband, Stanley Miller, a Findlay native. The couple moved to Findlay in 2019 and purchased the family business, Miller's Meats.

Her help as an English learner student support and parent liaison at FCS is not only boosting the confidence and success of the children but the educators, too. As a parent herself, Miller understands the idiosyncrasies of youth in general, but also the distinctive concerns and differences of kids who come from Haiti. When a friend of hers who works for the school district mentioned that help was needed with acclimating Haitian students to American classrooms, teaching methods, and customs, Miller stepped up.

FCS "was finding it challenging to get students to adapt, to integrate, and there's also technological proficiency that's needed. Back home, everything is done with pen and paper," Miller explained at an October 2024 Immigration Task Force meeting. "We still do cursive," she said, while most U.S. schools haven't taught cursive in years. "My role is to provide fluid communication, and that looks different every day."

Miller instructs on behavioral expectations for students, provides professional development for teachers "because there is a vast nuance between the language and the culture," works with parents on requirements such as immunizations and parent-teacher conferences, and much more.

"The idea is to provide so much hospitality that people are comfortable enough to ask for help and comfortable enough to say, 'Hey, I don't know what's going on here. Where do I fit in?' So, every day is something different, but I'm enjoying it," said Miller.

"I am passionate about hospitality and communication and those skillsets are the perfect marriage to serve the immediate needs at FCS," Miller continued. "I lived in both places long enough to understand the myriad questions that parents and students have when they first are faced with the 'how to's and what's next' issues. What really helps is context. Once you explain how these new sets of rules or responsibilities affect them and how important it is to their integration, you'd be surprised at how quickly things happen from then on."