

Giving the gift of confidence

By: Martine A. Thomas, Program Manager



Every Friday morning, in a local restaurant in the heart of Woburn Center, Selma Adler and Amina Mohamed sit down, drink coffee and begin their weekly English lesson. Sitting near a window on a beautiful autumn morning, Selma reaches for a cookie, baked by Amina, and asks her learner, "Did you remember to talk to the landlord about the oil for the heat?"

Amina begins to answer but her words are knotted in frustration. She places her fingers on her temple and shakes her head. Thirteen years ago, her husband handled tasks like that; however, her husband is no longer with her. Now it is her responsibility to keep a warm house.

"My husband was a good man, and he gave me a good life," says Amina a native of Somalia, who married her soul mate at seventeen. Amina's husband owned a business, which allowed him to lavish his family with a beautiful home, servants and other luxuries.

In 1991, the year her youngest daughter was born, a civil war broke out in her country. There was no national government in Somalia. While parts of the north were relatively peaceful, Amina and her family lived in an area where fighting flared up with little warning. Kidnapping, murder, robberies and other threats were prevalent. One evening, trouble came to her door; men in masks invaded the Mohammad household, held them at gunpoint and robbed the family. Then things got worse.

"The men wanted to rape one of my servants. My husband begged them to leave her alone," Amina painfully remembers.

In response to her husband's plea, the men pointed their guns at the father of four little girls and pulled their triggers.

In a blink of an eye, Amina's world was shattered. Within a week, she lost her husband and her sanctuary. She left her country and escaped to the United States. She arrived in the land of opportunities, feeling alone and depressed.

"I came to this country, when [my daughters] were young. I had problems, and thought too much. I kept thinking about everything. How am I going to take care of four children without a father? I don't speak English. I don't have a job. How am I going to send my children to college? How am I going to give them a good life?"

Attending an English class was Amina's first step to building a new life in America; however, she could not focus on her lessons because images of her husband's death continued to haunt her. Amina struggled to make sense of irregular and regular verbs while her classmates moved on to the next level.

Tired of not progressing in her classes, Amina searched for a new option and found English At Large. Eventually, she was matched with Selma, a new tutor at that time. She and Selma had chemistry, and with hard work, the fifty-three-year-old grandmother was able to focus, and she blossomed in her academic work.

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"I didn't speak any English when I first came here because I was sad, and I didn't talk to anyone. But, with Selma, I feel comfortable. Now, I am confident," She smiles, and turns to look at her tutor, "When I don't know something, I talk about it with Selma, and when I am sad, I talk to her about it too."

Selma, who has been a tutor with English At Large for almost two years, says, "I am not going to make Amina an English scholar because that is not her goal." Selma says, Amina's goal is to be independent enough to ask her doctor questions, to order from a menu or to make sure Amina is being charged the right amount when she's at the cash register.

During their tutoring session, they don't only chat about what is happening in Amina's life, they read stories, go over grammar points and sometimes go on fieldtrips.

"Amina is doing so well. She understands my language, and she doesn't need a translator when she visits her doctors," said Selma, who admires her learner's strength. "She talks to her doctor all by herself. She couldn't do that before."

"Everyday I used to be sad. I didn't get life. I am okay now," Amina says. "Three of my daughters graduated from college, and one is finishing high school. Thank God for the USA," Amina beams and polishes the last drop of her coffee, "Before, I didn't like to talk to anyone, but now, I am counting down days to Friday so I can talk to Selma."