

Service

ORGANIZATIONS LEADING THE WAY ONE PERSON AT A TIME

# English At Large



Jianping "Jimmy" Wu of Lexington with his tutor Gary Fallick also of Lexington.

By Laurie Atwater

Jianping "Jimmy" Wu calls it his "American Dream."

Jimmy is from Lexington where he lives with his wife. Together they care for their grandson who is now at Lexington High School. Jimmy works with his tutor Gary Fallick, also of Lexington each week on his English language skills, but truth be told they are more like friends than student and teacher.

Jimmy was born in Shanghai in 1931. His children immigrated to the United States and he came to visit them for the first time when he was 62 years old. He moved to the U.S. permanently in 2000. Like many older immigrants with grandchildren who grew up in the U.S., Jimmy found that he could not communicate with his grandchildren and felt isolated from the community. He tried classes, but it didn't work out for him so he approached the organization English At Large (EAL) for help.

Lexington resident Mildred Gilman founded English At Large in 1970 as a volunteer-based organization. Since then, the organization has grown to serve 20 communities and has helped more than 10,000 Boston-area adults improve their English skills. EAL is a one-to-one, all volunteer tutoring program that provides literacy instruction to learners like Jimmy Wu. Marlana Patton, Executive Director for English At Large explains their unique approach of matching

the learner's goals with instruction. "We call it literacy and learning for life," she says.

This one-to-one model proved to be the key to Jimmy's success. That and the special bond he developed with his "teacher" Gary. They really hit it off and Gary became part of Jimmy's "American Dream" right away. What Jimmy truly wanted was to become a citizen of his adopted country.

## JIMMY WU AND GARY FALICK

For Jimmy at almost 70 years old, the challenge to learn English is a great one. Fallick who had completed the training provided by English At Large and was ready to begin tutoring, was matched with Jimmy. Citizenship provided a context for their studies as they explored history, government and culture as a pathway toward acquiring the necessary language skills to pass the citizenship interview.

Jimmy Wu has a smile that won't quit. At a recent EAL event at Cary Library, Wu proudly told me that he is now 77 years old. Wu has one child in Las Vegas and one in Lexington. He and his wife have assisted in the after-school care of his Lexington grandson since he came to the U.S. and Jimmy cooks dinner for the family every night.

"They are truly an extended family," Fallick says. "We don't realize how this type of

arrangement enables the workforce," he adds. "Both parents are able to work because of Jimmy and his wife."

Fallick is a retired engineer who spent his career in technical marketing. "I was always involved in communication in a way," he says. He became interested in English At Large because he knew other enthusiastic volunteers. "It was just something that appealed to me," he says. "I thought, 'this is something worthwhile I could do.'"

It has proven to be quite worthwhile. Jimmy has earned his citizenship with Gary's help and he has learned to sing *You Are My Sunshine!* Next up: *Take Me Out to the Ballgame.* "Gary is helping me to understand baseball," Jimmy says with his contagious smile.

When I ask Jimmy what he loves about America he says, "America is Liberty, America is blue sky." In China, he explains, the sky is rarely blue. Jimmy also likes the fact that Americans have a longer lifespan—especially now that he's approaching 80! He tells me proudly that he walks every day to maintain his health.

Fallick and his wife Bebe were on hand for Jimmy's citizenship ceremony which was held aboard the historic U.S.S. Constitution and he says that the experience has "broadened his horizons in remarkable and unexpected ways."

## ELIZETTE CABRAL & MAUREEN BENNANI

Elizette Cabral is a young mother from Brazil. This year she won the EAL Inspiration Award. When she came to the United States she says couldn't say anything in English except "hi." Early on she applied for a job at Market Basket. The Manager told her that he was hiring cashiers, but she would have to learn enough English in two weeks to pass a test to work at the register. "I went home and studied and studied," she says and describes the many nights she would fall asleep with the study guides on her pillow. "I am going to sleep and the numbers I would hear in my sleep!"

Elizette passed the test and was given the job, but she never felt fully comfortable dealing with customers. "Sometimes they would be mad with me because I could not understand," she says.

Barbara Donohue has been an EAL tutor for five years. She enjoys making it easier for someone from another culture to transition to living in the U.S.

"They would talk bad about me to my boss. I would cry sometimes."

Now, Elizette prefers her current job cleaning houses until she can improve her language skills.

One of her friends told her about EAL and she was eventually matched with Lexington resident and volunteer tutor Maureen Bennani. Maureen and Elizette have been working together for over two years and in that time Elizette has increased her proficiency, her vocabulary and her confidence. "Maureen helped me, thank God!" Elizette says with an engaging smile.

Elizette cleans houses and offices six days a week. She admits that she is often tired when she arrives for her lesson with Maureen. "I was so nervous the first time I came to talk with Maureen," she says. "It's very hard, but [it] has been good."

Elizette misses her daughter Lais who will turn nine in January. Lais is still living in Brazil and being cared for by Elizette's parents. Like Jimmy and Gary, it is obvious that Maureen and Elizette have formed a special bond.

Maureen retired from teaching at Clarke Middle School in 2006 where she taught French and Spanish. Maureen was looking for a valuable way to contribute and use her skills in her retirement. "One day I went down to town hall to get my retirement papers and I picked up a brochure of volunteer opportunities in Lexington," she says. "When I got to the section on literacy volunteers I remembered my aunt had done something similar when she retired from teaching! She loved it."

Maureen decided to give it a shot. She speaks very favorably about the training she received from EAL and their initial assessment of Elizette's language skills. Each learner is tested extensively before being assigned so that the tutor knows at what level to begin instruction.

It turns out that Elizette only had four years



of formal education in Brazil. “Every time we would work on the assignments, Elizette would say “I’m not very smart,” Maureen says. “I thought it was an odd thing for her to say because you just know from talking with her that she is a smart girl, but then I realized that she had very little formal education in her own language and I understood.”

It’s taken more than two years of meeting for only two hours a week, but Elizette has advanced an entire level according to her annual progress evaluation. “She loves to read aloud,” Maureen says. “I notice her body language changes and there is a certain pride that she takes in her accomplishment.”

Elizette wants to work on “verbs.” She wants to learn more verbs so that she can express herself faster. “It’s hard for me,” she says haltingly, “I understand everything you talk, but when I talk it is difficult.” It frustrates her when she can’t express her thoughts and her feelings, but she continues to try.

Maureen says the EAL one-to-one program has worked beautifully because it has allowed them to work around their busy schedules as Elizette continues to improve as she and Maureen have formed a special bond through the program.

**VOLUNTEERS POWER THE PROGRAM**

“A few years ago we did a survey of our volunteers and across the board they said that they stay with the program because of the connection they form with their students,” Marlana Patton says.

Unlike structured classes, the meeting times can be changed to suit both the tutor and the learner. Patton says that EAL requires a minimum 52 hour per year time commitment from their volunteers plus attendance at one training session. Most of the tutors have been with the program for many years. “It takes times and dedication,” Patton says. Tutors come from a variety of backgrounds; they don’t have to come from a teaching background like Maureen. “It is not necessary for the teacher to understand the learner’s language. We are recruiting regular people,” she says.

Barbara Donohue is a technical writer and a dog trainer—a very busy woman. She has been a volunteer with English At Large for five years. Her current learner—Cherry (Yingping Jia) has been with her for three years. Yingping was nicknamed Cherry because she was born in cherry blossom time. Originally from Xi’an, Shaanxi province, China, Cherry is a grandmother who came to the U.S. in 2001 to live with her daughter and to help out with her two grandsons. Currently she lives in senior housing in Arlington.

Like Jimmy Wu, Cherry found learning English to be “very difficult” at her age. She learned about EAL at the library and it has proven to be much more than a tutoring program for her. “For learners,” Barbara says, “English At Large is kind of a lifeline.” Originally Barbara though she was volunteering to teach English speakers to read as part of a literacy program. She says it was a “big surprise” to learn that she would be teaching foreign students, but she was intrigued with the program and stayed with it. “I’ve learned so much,” she says. “I’m happy to make it easier for someone who comes from a different country to feel comfortable here.”

Cherry would agree. “Thank-you to English At Large,” she says, “for giving me a chance.” Barbara and Cherry worked very hard to prepare for Cherry’s citizenship interview. Cherry says that it was hard to study because “I don’t know ahead the topic.” But with her tutor’s help she passed and is now a proud American. “I love America,” she says. “Beautiful country! Beautiful people.”

Barbara says that she has gained as much as she has given. “I love the one-to-one aspect of it,” she says. “It’s my favorite kind of volunteering. English At Large helps people to not only learn



Maureen Bannani of Lexington with her learner Elizette Cabral. Maureen, a former language teacher at Clarke Middle School, and Elizette have been working together for two years.

English, but to become part of the culture.” Barbara says that she and Cherry often find themselves discussing traditions and sharing their experiences.

Cherry says that her life is much improved. She has been able to make friends at the Senior Center. “English At Large help us,” she

**Become an English Literacy Tutor**

To be an English literacy tutor, you don’t need previous teaching experience. You don’t need to know another language. You need only desire, commitment, and training. Contact the English At Large office for more information about becoming a literacy volunteer by email [volunteer@englishatlarge.org] or phone [781-395-2374].

**If you Need an English Literacy Tutor**

English At Large offers free English literacy tutors. To apply to get an English Literacy tutor contact the English At Large office by email [learn@englishatlarge.com] or by phone [781-395-2374].

English At Large has a long waiting list. Students may need to wait between six months and one year to have a tutor assigned.

says seriously.

**THE NEED FOR LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION**

English At Large (EAL) is a program staffed by volunteers, quietly working its magic in local libraries and coffee shops in the greater Boston area to help anxious English language learners to become fully vested in American society. Supported by a small professional staff, hundreds of volunteers deliver two core programs: one-to-one English tutoring and group conversation practice. EAL provides materials and ongoing training and support for their tutors. Most of their tutors stay with them for many years.

The program has a waiting list of over 300 prospective learners and many of them will wait months to be matched with a tutor. Immigrants with limited English proficiency swelled the population of the United States from 14 million to 23 million from 1990 to 2005 according to the U.S. Census Bureau records. The 2000

**ROBERT PUTNAM**

**A NATION OF TURTLES**

Why language training is so important.

A report released in 2007 by the non-partisan Migration Policy Institute identifies English language acquisition as “the most important integration challenge” for the country but also states that that our current capacity for educating non-English speakers falls woefully short.

Robert Putnam author of *Bowling Alone* and founder of the *Saguaro Seminar: Civic Engagement in America* recently released details of new Saguaro research on *Immigration and Social Cohesion*.

Putnam has been conducting research on the inter-relation of diversity (mainly examining race and ethnicity), immigration and social capital since 2001. The landmark study consisted of a huge nationwide telephone survey and uncovered some unsettling truths. “Diversity seems to trigger not in-group/out-group division, but anomie or social isolation,” Putnam wrote in the June issue of the journal *Scandinavian Political Studies*. “In colloquial language, people living in ethnically diverse settings appear to ‘hunker down’ — that is, to pull in like a turtle.”

Putnam’s team interviewed 30,000 people from communities across the United States and concluded that greater diversity leads to decline in almost all measures of civic engagement. It simply causes civic malaise. People don’t trust their neighbors, vote less, volunteer less, socialize less and care less. And surprisingly, the more diverse the environment, the less people trust *anyone—even those in their own ethnic group*. The effect is measurable. Talk about bowling alone.

“Hunkering down” as Putnam describes it, is a kind of self-imposed isolation that doesn’t look like the divergent, but more commonly understood reactions to racial diversity: conflict theory and/or contact theory, that is exposure to people from other backgrounds either increases understanding and lessens conflict (contact) or inversely increases intolerance and lessens understanding (conflict).

These are certainly not the findings that Putnam, the liberal promoter of social capital had hoped for. Presenting this research created considerable controversy because the findings have been co-opted by right-wing, anti-immigration proponents to prop up their arguments for closing the borders.

But Putnam chooses to focus on the opportunity that this data affords us to really understand and deal with this issue. In the short-term Putnam admits, the effect of diversity can be unsettling in society and how we address the feelings of the immigrant and the native populations does matter. He stresses the value of creating a “more encompassing sense of “we”—some sense of identity that cuts across the salient lines of race and ethnicity.” According to this study it’s going to take a lot more than folksy ethnic festivals to combat the growing social isolationism in this country, but we know it can be done Putnam says, because we’ve done it before. We are, after all, a nation of immigrants.

According to Putnam, part of the solution to fighting isolation and hunkering, is developing “a successful immigration policy” with an emphasis on providing “more English language training and to do it in a context in which immigrants can get to know each other and get to know native-born American citizens.”

**EAL, continued from page 31**

Census revealed that 47 million Americans speak another language at home, by 2005 that figure was up to 52 million. Experts agree that proficiency in English remains the greatest



**Pictured above, a few members of the ESL Board members Steven Reny, Gary Fallick, Executive Director Marlana Patton, Leslie Damon and former student Violeta Jeliazkova.**

indicator for the success of these recent immigrants, yet few programs and long waits stand in the way of full participation for this population.

English instruction is expensive. The federal and state governments devote woefully inadequate dollars to address this problem and the slack is absorbed by a cadre of nonprofit organizations throughout the country. According to EAL, as many as 46 percent of Massachusetts' adults struggle with basic literacy tasks. Within the EAL Service area as many as 38,000 immigrants need literacy services.

Today the total budget for EAL is about \$150K which includes a grant from the Commonwealth for \$106K. Their focus is on conversation and learning everyday skills—shopping, balancing a checkbook and talking with a teacher or a doctor she explains. “Learners are willing to wait because they know that learning English is the key to their success,” program director Patton says. The need for volunteers cannot be understated. To put a dent into the current waiting period of about seventeen months, many more volunteers must be trained.

**FALSE STEREOTYPES**

“Many mistakenly believe that immigrants don’t want to learn English, but that is simply not the case,” Patton says. Immigrants are challenged trying to shop for food, attend school conferences, describe symptoms to a doctor and advocate for their children. “They’ve given up everything and everyone to come here and make a life.” Patton indicates that the welfare and education of children is a top priority. Poignantly, many of the mothers are further isolated from their own younger children who are born in the U.S. and speak English as their primary language. “I’ve known parents who can’t communicate with their youngest child. They have this misguided idea that they shouldn’t speak anything but English at home so they don’t share a language unless the

parents learn English. When they can’t speak English they have no parental authority.”

Patton is compelling as she describes the challenges of a “forty-five year old mom who’s trying to be a wife, run the family and learn a language too.” These conditions according to Patton are very common; about 80% of their learners are caring for dependents while their spouses are going to work. “They are very often isolated,” Patton says.

It is possible for immigrants to survive without learning English in ethnically homogenous neighborhoods and communities just as it was a century ago, but it is a common misconception that “new” immigrants are not choosing to learn English. Demographers are quick to point out that there have always been ethnic neighborhoods. A century ago the language might have been German or Italian or Polish. University of Wisconsin-Madison professor of German Joseph Salmons produced a fascinating study of Germans who immigrated to Wisconsin in the mid 1800s, and concluded that German remained the primary language of German immigrants well into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century—the second generation of American-born Germans in the area.

Today however, the language barrier is poses more of a challenge than it did 100 years ago—it is a greater barrier to opportunity in the workforce as our economy has shifted from manufacturing jobs to service jobs. Unskilled and labor intensive jobs are more limited. Without learning English, the ability of a worker to migrate out of low skill jobs to better paying employment is curtailed. Non English speaking immigrants become isolated in work situations structured for non-English speakers which further slows their language acquisition.

EAL learner Azad is from Armenia. His English reading and writing skills were good when he arrived in this country, but his conversational skills were limited. He knew that speaking well was going to help him advance in his work. He says, “When I’m talking better English than the others, I got a better place. I’m a supervisor and shift leader now and I get a better rate.”

The EAL success stories are numerous and incredibly touching. Many learners have gone on to pursue more education or better employment. Whether it’s one-on-one or through their conversation classes the EAL focus is on developing relationships, sharing experiences, exploring culture and learning English. This is a group of eager learners who are managing complex challenges to fulfill their commitment to learning English. Juggling jobs, raising families and dreaming of citizenship motivate them to work hard to achieve their dreams. Like immigrants before them, they look to America and hope for a better life.

English At Large provides support for their dreams through language. When people can communicate, they are better able to integrate into society, to participate in democracy, to contribute to the economy and most importantly to share their amazing stories.