

The Eighteen Year Conversation

By Jean Robbins

Stan Simon, a retired media executive, and Christina, a student from Germany, sit in a private corner of the Harold Drimmer Library, talking. He answers a question, they laugh, and the conversation goes on. This is Stan's third year of conversations with foreign students. So far, he has met with students from Japan, Russia, Germany, Israel, South Korea, and Ecuador. He estimates this is probably his 234th conversation.

Look around the Library and see that Stan and Christina are not the only older person and young student talking earnestly together. There are twosomes like them scattered all around. They are the Conversation Partners, and this is the Eighteenth anniversary of the College's Conversation Partners Program.

The Program started in 1991 when French Prof. John Ahern, who also worked with English as a Second Language students, recognized that foreign students needed help with more than writing and vocabulary. "We needed to bring in culture--everything from making eye contact on a conversational level to applying for a job to eventually arriving at thinking in English."

He knew they would need one-on-one help and realized he had exactly the right pool of teachers -- the seniors, all retirees, in the adult French Club. Would they be interested in talking with foreign students? The response was enthusiastic. Prof. Ahern paired them off with students from cultures in which they were most interested. The Conversation Partners Program was born.

Eighteen years later there are 110 partners, most of whom are senior retirees, with 72 who are currently working with 91 foreign students. Prof. Ahern concludes, "There are no educators like seniors." He himself still has a partner--Jesus from Mexico.

The format is the same--informal conversation that introduces new vocabulary and American culture easily and naturally. Sports, movies, books, family--Conversation Partners talk with students about anything that interests them.

Margery Chapman has been a Partner for four years, and has worked with students from China, Taiwan, Turkey and South Korea. Her current Dominican Republic student delightedly reports that she no longer needs to translate because she has at last started thinking in English.

One student was embarrassed to go to a restaurant because she did not understand the strange language of the menu. "Appetizers, a la carte, tax and liquor exempted along with specials of the day." What did it all mean? Her Partner took her out for lunch to a diner and they puzzled through the pages of the menu together.

Len Corlin has been a partner for six years. He still corresponds with his Italian partner. His current South Korean partner is married, with children, and keeps house for her UN delegate brother while she accomplishes her goal of improving her English.

Faith Klein knew that her Japanese student had a

major role in a dance performance. Unlike the American students, she would not have relatives to clap especially loudly for her. Faith rounded up a few of her friends, so the young ballerina had her own group to cheer as she took her smiling bows.

Many Partners report correspondences that have continued for years and years and many relationships have become true friendships.

A discussion series, "Something To Talk About", expands the program. It brings such wide ranging topics as economics, New York City, politics, and health care to students for discussion. The meetings are rich opportunities for adding new vocabulary and exploring new cultures. It also importantly gives students the opportunity to talk in a group setting.

In a recent small group discussion, Martine from Cameroon described her country's health system and learned what "public" and "private" means as applied to health insurance. Vitor from Brazil and Miriam from Peru described their health systems and the problems in delivery to rich and poor. And Japanese Kia explained the complex payment system in her country, based on both age and income. All four contributed lively descriptions of their sometimes mysterious experiences with American medical practices.

In the past eighteen years, thousands of students have had thousands of conversations with thousands of Partners through the Conversation Partners Program. Watch for them as you walk through the Library. It will likely be an older man or woman and an eager young student and they will be talking, talking, talking.



Conversation Partner Eric Kramer and his student Mayu Matsumoto

The Academy for Entrepreneurial Excellence: Celebrating Ten Years of Volunteering

In these tough economic times, almost every economist is saying that the majority of new jobs will not be created by big business, but by mid-size and small businesses. In fact, it is the wonder of the market economy that we depend on innovators like Steve Jobs and Bill Gates to build businesses in their garages, make products that are released into the market, and then hire people to grow the business as the products or services gain traction. Without entrepreneurs, our economy would remain stagnant and innovation would collapse.

Westchester is undoubtedly a haven for entrepreneurs. Located just a few miles north of Manhattan, it attracts men and women with drive, spirit and passion. Over the past ten years, small business owners have come to Westchester Community College to participate in The Academy for Entrepreneurial Excellence. The Academy, begun in 1999 in partnership with The Business Council

of Westchester, is designed to meet the needs of business owners who are already in business. This intensive fifteen week program combines executive coaching and classroom training and finishes with a panel discussion in which each graduate presents their business plan to a select group of consultants and business owners.

The lecturers and coaches who participate in The Academy are some of the most talented in their fields and each presents without a fee. The leadership program is taught by the Director of



Applying the knowledge they gained in the Academy are Rick Keifer, Diane Hapke and John Montreal (l. to r.) from Network Crazy. "We had a lot of customers but no real infrastructure. The program helped (us) focus on direction, win new business and save money."

Leadership Studies at the US Military Academy at West Point. The public relations section is taught by the owner of the most successful PR firm in the Hudson Valley, Co-Communications. The time management section is taught by the manager of a leading financial services firm. The list goes on.

Without the benefit of these volunteer services, we would not be able to run this program or the program would need to have a significant increase in tuition. The results of the efforts of these volunteers have been extraordinary. Alumni of The Academy have returned to us and told us that the program not only changed their businesses, but their lives. They have gone on to hire and thrive, increasing employment and tax revenue for Westchester County. In the final analysis, we must salute those volunteers who come to lecture at the Academy. Often they drive long distances and stay far longer than we ask of them.

Entrepreneurs take risks so that the rest of us can enjoy a thriving economy and better lives. America has long been the engine of change in the world, from the light bulb, to the telephone, to the automobile and the airplane. Programs like The Academy serve to help these entrepreneurs and they are only successful because of the volunteer efforts of a dedicated faculty.

Conversation Partners Receive "Volunteer Spirit" Award

On April 24th, the Conversation Partners Program received the 2009 Education & Literacy Volunteer Spirit Award from the Volunteer Center of the United Way. The Volunteer Spirit Awards celebrate the impact that volunteers have on Westchester County, honoring the special volunteers who

exemplify the rich array of ways individuals make a difference to the community.

Several of our volunteers were on hand to accept the award on behalf of the entire program, and posed for the photo below with other dignitaries who were present.



Pictured left to right, bottom row: Dea Dempsey, Barbara Gardos, Nancy Heymann. Middle row: Paula Dambroff, Ann Vetrano, Lois Kroll; top row: Joanna Straub (Executive Director of the Volunteer Center), Peter Brandenburg, Adele Shansky, County Executive Andy Spano, Richard Melnikoff, David Silverstone, Len Corlin, Alisa Kestens (Board Chair of the Volunteer Center)

This year, over 380 volunteers from all corners of the County have contributed their time and talent to benefit Westchester Community College. Together their thousands of hours of service have helped students make the most of their educational opportunities and have helped WCC accomplish goals which are not provided for in the College budget. We thank all those who have chosen to "make a difference" on our campus.