

Learning about Culture through Volunteering



Ann Vetrano and Yuko Ogura are just like any other mothers who swap stories about their children. The difference is that while they share anecdotes about dealing with teenagers, Ogura is learning English at the same time.

More than sixty individuals volunteer as Conversation Partners, helping those taking English as a Second Language classes improve their speaking and listening skills. When the Gateway Center opens, these individuals, and more than 200 other college volunteers will have space in that new state-of-the-art building.

A mental health counselor from South Salem, Vetrano began conversing with Ogura in February of last year. “We hit it off from the start,” says Vetrano. “The word that best describes my feelings about being involved with this program is ‘joy.’ I truly love the interaction, and I enjoy learning about Japanese culture.”

Once a week, Ogura, an immigrant from Tokyo who lives in Harrison, meets with Vetrano to discuss family, culture, and current events. Frankly, any topic is fair game for her conversation partner. “She’s like my American mother,” says Ogura. “She’s so funny and she’s so helpful. She helps me with my paperwork and also takes the time to explain American customs.”

Sometimes, they just spend time chatting. Other times, they perform exercises in which Ogura uses a

mirror to look at her mouth while speaking, in order to determine the shape it makes when pronouncing certain words.

Recently, they read and discussed *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahari, a novel about an Indian family’s assimilation into American life. The book led them to numerous conversations about their own personal stories. Vetrano’s father was an Italian immigrant who refused to speak his native language at home, while Ogura’s husband and children speak only Japanese when they are with her.

Ogura hopes to finish her English as a Second Language courses next year, and then move on to take Real Estate certification classes. A former advertising salesperson in Japan, she is looking to make a career change. “This program is very helpful for ESL students,” says Ogura. “I’ve recommended it to some of my friends and they have already started with their own conversation partners.”

