



The Ellen Street Shout

Spring 2008



Searching for Words

*Does public speaking make you nervous?
Try doing it in a language you barely know*

It's a late winter afternoon in a main-floor classroom at Hugh John Macdonald middle school and the topic for the day is prepositions.

Open that section of the grammar book in just about any other classroom in the country and you can bet most eyes would soon be wandering to the windows or glazing over. But not here. The dozen women in the classroom are keenly scribbling down what the teacher is writing on the blackboard and are determinedly intent as each, in turn, is asked to complete the sentence.

"Manitoba is near ... ?," the teacher asks.

"Regina," comes the hesitant reply.

"Good, and Saskatchewan is next to ...?"

"Alberta."

"That's right, very good."

And so it goes. As the examples of words used to describe the relationship between nouns and pronouns continues, the pencils scribble away, and the intensity never flags. Even when the excited chatter of one or more of the dozen toddlers in the room reaches a crescendo – which is about every four minutes. Even when the next preposition ("Alberta is beside Saskatchewan.") is one of those typical baffling idiosyncrasies of the English language. (Beside? Next to? Do we really need both?)

There's no doubt that learning English for these women – all of them newly arrived from countries, and cultures, far distant from Canada – is very serious business.

Patricia is from Honduras, and she and her husband spent two years in Costa Rica as refugees. Then one day they were told they had been accepted by Canada and all of a sudden they were in Winnipeg, arriving this past December to face the worst cold snap in years.

"It was very cold, but I like it in Canada," she says softly, frequently pausing to find the word she wants and apologizing each time. "In my country, there is poverty. Here there is opportunity."

Opportunity, yes. And challenges you'd never think about until you're faced with them. Like going on her first grocery trip to Giant Tiger, to buy meat, fruit and – what's that word? – cereal.

"I don't know how to speak English. The money, the ..., we don't ...,," she pauses and apologizes again – the word she wants isn't there.

"It was difficult," she concludes.

Patricia smiles when Elizabeth Treidler comes over. The first teacher hired when the Newcomer Literacy Initiative was started in January 2007, Treidler has become adept at conjuring up that word that isn't there. With her help, Patricia explains she is a person who has always talked a lot to her friends and neighbours, and relied on those conversations to help her meet the challenges of the day, and life in



THE KIDS are never far away from mom. NLI students celebrate International Adult Learner's Week celebration at Hugh John Macdonald school this March.

Seid Ahmed Photo

general. But there are few Spanish speakers at IRCOM House and none in this class.

"Sometimes I feel alone ... lonely," she says.

She points to the women still at the shared desks at the front of the class, still attacking those prepositions with zeal, and adds, "These are my friends but I don't know what they are saying. It is difficult."

She smiles again, and gives a bigger smile when told the interview is over. Prepositions never looked so good.

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Don't stop reading!

There's a lot more in The Shout

ELLY SPEAKS UP: It's a shocker, sometimes The System actually works ... and "Back away from the washing machine" – tales from the hallways of IRCOM House. Catch the latest gossip from the Ellen Street Insider. Page 4.

O CANADA: Volunteer Anne Mahon gains a new appreciation of her homeland from people who have just arrived here. Page 3.

THE OTHER SIDE: In the battle against poverty and gang culture, there's no quick fix. But if you do enough of the little things right, it really does make a difference. Get a glimpse into what IRCOM is really all about. Page 4.

WHO ARE YOU? IRCOM board chief Lindsay will get embarrassed if we call him a champion of the downtrodden. But that's OK with us. Find out how a middle-aged real estate sales guy from Fort Garry spends his spare time. Page 3.

A SHAMELESS PITCH: You knew this was coming. Still, give us a chance to say why our good work depends on your hard cash. Page 4.



SAY IT WITH DANCE: NLI Teacher Dorota Blumczynska (centre) and her students put on a multicultural dance performance at the International Adult Learner's Week celebration.

Seid Ahmed Photo

A passion for learning

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Below is the speech (produced as she wrote it, in handwriting so neat it would make your grade school teacher weep with joy) that Patricia gave two weeks earlier at a celebration in the theatre at Hugh John Macdonald to mark International Adult Learner's Week. There were close to 100 people at the event – fellow students and children, NLI teachers and volunteers, people who work for agencies helping refugees, and friends of IRCOM House. The words, of course, are simple, but it's easy to empathize when she speaks of what “a big challenge” is was to stand up and give a speech in front of so many people. But big challenges are an everyday event in the lives of the NLI students.

Asked about scary moments in Winnipeg, Monique recalls her first taxi ride. She is fluent in Congolese and French, but neither was spoken by the taxi driver.

“All I could say was my name, and to tell him to go, go to the store,” recalls Monique. “I just said please, please, please, go to the store.” Monique also gave a speech at the learners' celebration, as did Arek, whose education virtually ended when she fled Sudan at the age of 15. After eight years as a refugee in Egypt, she doesn't hesitate to say what she values in her new country. “I like Canada because you can go to school,” she says.

Elizabeth Treidler views her students as heroines.

“What really surprises me – and I know this sounds trite – is how happy they are, how focused they are,” she says. “Everyone here has goals, but their life is not easy and they have many setbacks. But it never seems to bother them. They are just so resilient. I think if I were them, I would have trouble dragging myself out of bed some mornings.”

In my country there is poverty... in Canada, opportunity

My name is Patricia and I am from Honduras. Having me here, in front of you speaking english is a big challenge becose I knew very little english. I only started to learn english 3 months ago when I arrived in Canada. I am very happy to live in this wonderful country because I know I have a lot of opportunity, in my country there is a lot of poverty and a lot

of people don't go to school. I think that if my country had a little bit of the best of what Canada has to offer, the people of my country would live better. I would like to thank all the people that help me, the welcome Place that received me, to this big country that opened his door, and above all to God.

NLI ain't like your school

“Quiet class” The favourite phrase of teachers everywhere is never heard in the two NLI classrooms (funded by the province, Neighbourhoods Alive, and the Winnipeg Foundation). And for good reason. Half the class is under the age of 18 months. If you think one toddler can be loud, try putting a dozen of them together – especially when one of them has just learned that pretending to eat Fuzzy Bunny's head is a guaranteed laugh-getter.

Multi-tasking isn't optional: “You've got the Karen women trying to speak Swahili. And they're taking care of each other's children – if a child is crying, anyone will pick him up and comfort him. It can be bedlam at times, and while it's not the most ideal learning environment, it works.” – NLI teacher Elizabeth Treidler

You liked no-school days: NLI serves parents with small children (refugees aren't eligible for daycare subsidies) and older refugees who don't feel ready for regular EAL classes. The program quickly became so popular that classes were seriously overcrowded, with as many as 15 students, just as many toddlers, plus several teachers, childminders and volunteers. When students were told the class would have to be split and they would only be able to attend two (instead of four) classes a week, they were up in arms. The students wanted to start petitions, lobby politicians, or even fund part of the program costs themselves. Fortunately, Manitoba Labour and Immigration came through with additional funding and Hugh John Macdonald offered a classroom. The other class is held at Victoria Alberta school, kitty corner from IRCOM House.

The goal? Lots more school: Cherry, a member of the Karen people from Burma, has already “graduated” to regular EAL classes because she has childcare help from others in her ethnic community who also live at IRCOM House. As soon as she is eligible for daycare subsidies, she will go to school full time. Ultimately, she wants to become a pharmacy nurse. “When I first came (to NLI class), I was nervous because we didn't know each other, we are from different countries and I was the only Karen in the class,” she recalls. “But NLI is good because everyone is the same as me. I was lucky.” After her regular morning EAL class, Cherry often drops by the NLI class to help look after the children, and do a little reading. On this day, she was reading a biography of Ben Carson, the son of a teenaged mother in inner-city Detroit who went on to Yale, then medical school, and became head of pediatric neurosurgery at John Hopkins at the age of 33.

O Canada

Volunteers are people we both admire and yet think of as different from the rest of us. We'd like to be like them but, honestly, how do they find the time? And who has the energy for all those good works? Really, how do they do it?

In this eloquent essay, written in January 2008, NLI volunteer Anne Mahon spills the secret of what volunteers mean when they say they get more than they give.

I have developed a fresh appreciation for our national anthem *O Canada*. It's because of my new routine Tuesday mornings. I used to spend it having coffee with a friend or efficiently ticking off my list of errands one by one, but five months ago I shook up my Tuesdays and shook up my view of the world, too. I am volunteering as a helper in an English Adult Learning class (formerly called ESL). On any given Tuesday morning, 18 women come trudging through the Winnipeg snow, often with their babies tied to their backs, to sit in a bright basement classroom at the local elementary school. Many of these women never had the chance to learn to read or write in their birth language. They learn English while their young children are ably cared for. This may be the only program that lets toddlers and babies stay close by their parents while English is taught. The women are from a number of African countries, as well as China, Burma and Thailand. A community has formed and I am delighted and surprised to find myself in the middle of it.

There is Haweya; 42 like me, but a widow with four Somali teenagers to raise. She works nights cleaning offices and comes in each morning, eyes bright and alive regardless of how tired she is. She reads well, but is frustrated with her spoken word, which needs the chance to develop. I am sure she has so much to say; judging by her spirit, but it is currently confined to the borders of her limited vocabulary. At the Christmas party she led a boisterous game of musical chairs, ululating as is her Somali celebration custom. Laughter has no language barrier.

There is one male amongst the loud cackle of women. Changming is from China. He is a polite and quiet family man with a quick and gentle smile. He works evenings and is only able to come to the morning classes. A guy could feel out of place amid all the loud children and nursing babies, but he stays, I believe, because he wants so desperately to learn English. He works as a security guard, but pointed to a newspaper picture of a police officer and told me this is the work he wants to do.

I don't really know Yenee. Her English is limited to hello, and simple one-word answers. I do know she is a grandmother, and Ethiopian. Her forehead is high and her cheekbones still prominent on an aging face. I find her dignified and peaceful. One morning we played a game introducing ourselves with the traditional greeting of our birth countries. Many of us laughed at the repetition of saying hello over and over. Her introduction



was the memorable one. Slowly and purposefully she gave me a half hug while shaking my hand, and simultaneously placing her head first by the left side of my head, then by the right side, and finally by the left again. "Three," she said with raised fingers. I felt I had been truly welcomed.

Each person, each face has a story. I crave to know more. Things slip out here and there; someone has six sisters spread over three continents, but none in Winnipeg. Another was a hairdresser in her home country and cannot find the right hair creams here, or the money to pay for her beauty technician's training. I marvel at how they accept me and each other; Somali and Ethiopian, Muslim and Catholic. We laugh a lot. If only the world mirrored our classroom.

These students, their journeys, triumphs and heartbreaks, are all stored away in their birth languages. I am privileged to help them slowly and painstakingly learn the language that can unlock these stories, lead them to training or employment, and belonging in this new place. May their Winnipeg transform from a foreign prairie city to an unexpected home. For me, I have found an unexpected home, too. They greet me waving and smiling, encourage me to come more mornings and help them. They tell me I am a good teacher. I feel accepted and valued despite having no training for this, aside from helping my own three children learn to read and write. What a curiosity this is to me – a wonder, really.

Every Tuesday morning I climb the steps of this inner-city school where 60% of the children are newcomers. Inevitably it is 9 a.m. and I open the doors as the familiar sound of *O Canada* plays through the loudspeakers in the hallway. The first time, I stood next to a plucky looking black Muslim girl of about 6. Her hijabed face was a movement of mouth and mischievous eyes as she confidently sang along. She knew all the words. I stood silently, the awkward adult waiting for the final line so I could get where I needed to go.

But now, all that has changed. I stop, happy to honour this anthem with a renewed appreciation of what it means to live in a land which is strong and free. And I sing along too.

Who are you?

My name is Lindsay Ward. I do live in Fort Garry and I sell commercial real estate. I'm also president of the board of directors of IRCOM.

Sorry about the stereotype, but shouldn't someone like you be devoting your spare time to golf?

I have hobbies but golf isn't one of them. It's not a game that interests me.

But helping refugees does?

I believe it's our duty to help the stranger in our midst and I believe Winnipeg benefits from having newcomers come to this city. I'm not sure I'm helping refugees directly. The board's job is really to help our staff acquire the resources to provide badly needed services to newcomers.

And how's that working out?

We've made tremendous strides in the past two years and most importantly we have a team of very talented and dedicated people who are really making a difference in the lives of newcomers. But the need is far greater than the resources we have. We need to do more.



The other side of the story

Local news reports can be scary things – some tales of gangs and violence sound like something from L.A. or Detroit instead of little old Winnipeg.

But IRCOM House program co-ordinator Abdikheir Ahmed says relax, it's not that bad: Yes, there are gangs, drugs, and crime in the inner-city. But it's also a place where thousands of honest, decent people live and work. Ahmed says even local residents sometimes are too quick to fear.

He points to an example which happened at IRCOM House during spring break. He got a call saying there was a gang hanging around on the 5th floor. When he went up, he found a group of eight teenaged boys he knows who have no gang ties.

"They said to me, 'Abdi, we have no place to go and it's cold outside. Please, we just want to be together,'" he recalls.

"People see a half a dozen kids hanging out by a building and they think, 'Oh no, it's a gang.' But it's just they have don't always have a place they can go to."

And that's the second thing: Many of these kids do have places to go, at least some of the time. They're enthusiastic participants in programs run by IRCOM House and other agencies.

"We need more of these positive things," he says. "These programs are small building blocks but when you put them together they constitute something larger."

Ahmed says he's not freaked out by the headlines, sad as they are, because he knows so many children and has seen how positively they respond to encouragement.

"I have seen refugee kids who have come here and been put in grade 7 or 8 and cannot read a word," he says. "But now they can read pages in a book. When they see what they can accomplish, they are just so proud. You would not believe it."



Abdikheir Ahmed

Ellen Street Insider



It's always fashionable to complain about government, but Elly's a contrarian and wanted us to kick off *The Insider* with two tales about caring civil servants and fast-moving bureaucracies. ... Tale No. 1 is a small item but an important one for a whole bunch of kids who live at IRCOM House and the surrounding area. One of our most popular events (organized by IRCOM House and **Welcome Place**) is Friday night soccer at the **Hugh John Macdonald** school gym. It attracts a big crowd of teens – as many as 80 boys have shown up, although to keep things manageable, the number of participants is restricted to about 30 boys, aged 14 to 18. The problem is boys that age have a powerful kick and can damage lights and other gym equipment. So school board policy forbids using its gyms for indoor soccer for kids 14 or over. When the policy came to light at Hugh John, that seemed to spell the end. But school trustee **Cindy Gilroy-Price** and superintendent **Jan Schubert** came to the rescue. Their solution? A trial policy exemption just for the Friday night kids at Hugh John. If it works, the trial policy may one day become the norm, a change that would benefit kids' indoor soccer teams across the city. ... Tale No. 2 is a gritty inner-city story. Like it or not, refugee kids – like many, many inner-city kids – are targeted as recruits by gangs. So it's an ongoing challenge to keep bad people from hanging around IRCOM House. In late winter, a few snuck in – apparently with the idea that one of the laundry rooms would be a good drug-dealing locale. An IRCOM employee quickly found out what was going on, but when confronted, one of the dealers pulled a knife before running off. Frightening stuff, but the key is how – and how fast – you respond. And in this case, **Manitoba Housing and Renewal Corp.** (our building's owner) reacted in record time. Portfolio officer **Ruth Espirtu** jumped in and quickly found

additional funds for security guards (normally something we have only in summer) as well as a very high-tech camera and monitoring system. This is stuff that makes a difference. ... They're called the **Karen People**, but Elly has taken to calling them "the busy people." Over 150 Kareni (most had been living in refugee camps in Thailand after being persecuted in their native Burma) arrived in Winnipeg last year, and seven families live at IRCOM House. "They're extremely curious and very interested in learning, especially learning trades," notes IRCOM executive director **Noëlle DePape**. House manager **Manny Revidad** can testify to that. He's had to explain things such as how light bulbs work and given lessons in operating the industrial floor cleaner used in the hallways. To keep the busy people, well, busy, Manny taught several how to paint and last year they volunteered to paint the main floor. It looks great although Elly was never a huge fan of beige. So she's very pleased that the 2nd floor is being painted red and the 3rd floor green – and that five Karen residents (and one Somali teen) will be paid while they hone their painting skills, thanks to an employment training grant from **LITE** (Local Investment Towards Employment). ... Ack, we're running out of space! Let's mention at least one of the new staff at IRCOM – **Habtamu Wedaja**, community resource co-ordinator. Originally from Ethiopia, Habtamu has a couple of degrees, worked for the U.N. High Commission on Refugees and has vast experience in, and passion for, working with refugees. Impressive, eh? But get this – there were at least a half dozen equally qualified candidates for the job. Depape notes there were 30 applicants and her "short list" was 10 people, all but one a newcomer to Canada. "People say there's a shortage of skilled labour. I say they should check out the newcomer talent pool," she offered.

The Plug

If you believe in giving newcomers a hand up so they can establish themselves in Canada, and think that IRCOM's staff and volunteers are doing just that – then please support us.



SHOUT IT OUT: Forward a copy of this pdf to folks you think might be interested in refugee and inner-city issues. Urge them to sign up for their own copy of *The Shout* by emailing info@ircom.ca

COME ON DOWN: To 95 Ellen and check out us out. We always need volunteers for after-school and recreation programming, tutoring EAL, and translation. Call volunteer co-ordinator Melanie Gonzalez at 943-8765. We're also in dire need of help from someone with website experience.

EXPERIENCE PAINLESS GIVING: You can donate to IRCOM online at canadahelps.org (type "refugee manitoba" in the search box). You can make a one-time donation, sign up for a monthly amount (a base of people giving us \$5 or \$10 a month would be awesome), or even give your friends charity gift cards. To donate by cheque, call our office at **943-8765**.

The Shout is produced by IRCOM's Partnership Committee. Contact the editor, Glenn Cheater, at cheaterg@mts.net