

The Conversation

December 2021



Greetings, Friends of Welcoming the Stranger!

All of us at WTS hope that you enjoyed a Happy Thanksgiving. We know that WTS students from many backgrounds embrace this uniquely American holiday and its spirit of gratitude; each one is thankful for your support of WTS that helps them learn and grow here in their adopted country.

Your support has provided free classes for 140 students this fall term, a 22 % increase over Fall 2020. Thank you!

As we make plans for our winter and spring terms, we recognize that the help of more volunteer teachers would allow us to better accommodate all of the students who register for our classes. By giving just a couple of hours a week, a volunteer teacher can facilitate an online class for adult immigrant students, providing essential skills and community to help them in their new lives. Training is provided and volunteering can be done from the convenience of home. If you or someone you know would like to learn more about becoming a volunteer teacher, please click [here](#).

Vilma and Sue: American Story



Sue Saddlemyre (on the left), and Vilma de Lara (on the right) becomes a US Citizen

Vilma De Lara first arrived in the U.S. from the Dominican Republic in 1995. The country of her birth was not a place where it was easy to live or make a better life

for oneself.

“For me, America is the land of opportunity,” says Vilma.

Vilma, her daughter, Javilin, and her husband, Willie, put down roots in Warminster, PA in 2016. Vilma’s son, Willie Jr., was born in 2009 with spina bifida, a birth defect in which a baby's spinal cord fails to develop properly in utero. Vilma is her son’s main caregiver and has been since he left the hospital six months after his birth.

“By 2020 I began to feel insecure and worry about my permanent residency in the U.S, says Vilma, “and I started to see that many things became difficult for Hispanics. I thought that I needed to be a US citizen for my children and my own security.”

Sue Saddlemire retired after spending 20 fulfilling years as a social studies teacher in the Council Rock School District in Bucks County, PA. A newspaper article she had read and saved the year she was planning her retirement first brought Welcoming the Stranger (WTS) to her attention. She joined as a volunteer teacher in 2017.

“I love teaching and much of my time in the classroom was spent focused on United States government, history, and geography which are all part of the citizenship test,” says Sue. “This work is a wonderful thing to do because I love our country and the principles it was founded on. I really enjoy sharing all of this with my students. In turn, every student I meet teaches me so much.”

When Vilma discovered WTS in January of 2021 and began working with Sue, the pandemic had moved all WTS classes online. But Vilma was able to forge a strong bond with her teacher even as she overcame a lack of fluency in English.

“Sue was a very good teacher,” says Vilma. “Excellent. I especially loved learning U.S. history with her.”

“Unfortunately,” says Sue, “I didn’t have a chance to spend too much time with Vilma because her test date came up during our first semester together. However, I can tell you that I was very impressed with how hard she worked to prepare for the test and her strong desire to become a U. S. citizen. She shares this in common with my other students.”

Says Vilma, “I want the people to know that WTS teachers are excellent and that it is very important to people like me that the classes are free. Thanks to WTS I am a citizen. I recommend WTS to everyone who wants to become a citizen.”

“My citizenship students all differ in some ways based on where they came from, why they chose to come here and their unique immigration experiences, says Sue. “Some have shared that they fled persecution from their home countries and others have chosen to follow family members to this country. What they have in common is a desire to seek a better life and more opportunities for their children and grandchildren. They are all passionate about becoming citizens of this country!”

Vilma agrees. “I was so happy and excited to become a citizen. I feel safe. I can vote. Now my husband will apply for citizenship and take citizenship classes with Welcoming the Stranger. I love the United States!”

The story of Vilma and Sue is both an American story and a quintessential WTS story. Citizen volunteers like Sue show newcomers like Vilma that there are people who care about them and their stories and want to welcome them to our country. Immigrants like Vilma make our country a richer, stronger, and better place. We extend our admiration and gratitude to them both.

News From the WTS Office

Throughout autumn, the WTS team has been working to serve immigrants here in greater Philadelphia.

WTS was the recipient of \$5,000.00 from the PA Immigration and Citizenship Coalition (PICC) and distributed 100% of the funds directly to several local families who needed assistance with rent and food.

Our first-ever virtual fundraiser was held in October. The video concert called **World Music: A Feast for the Ears** featured six professional performers from around the world and brought the joy and unity of music into our generous donors' homes.

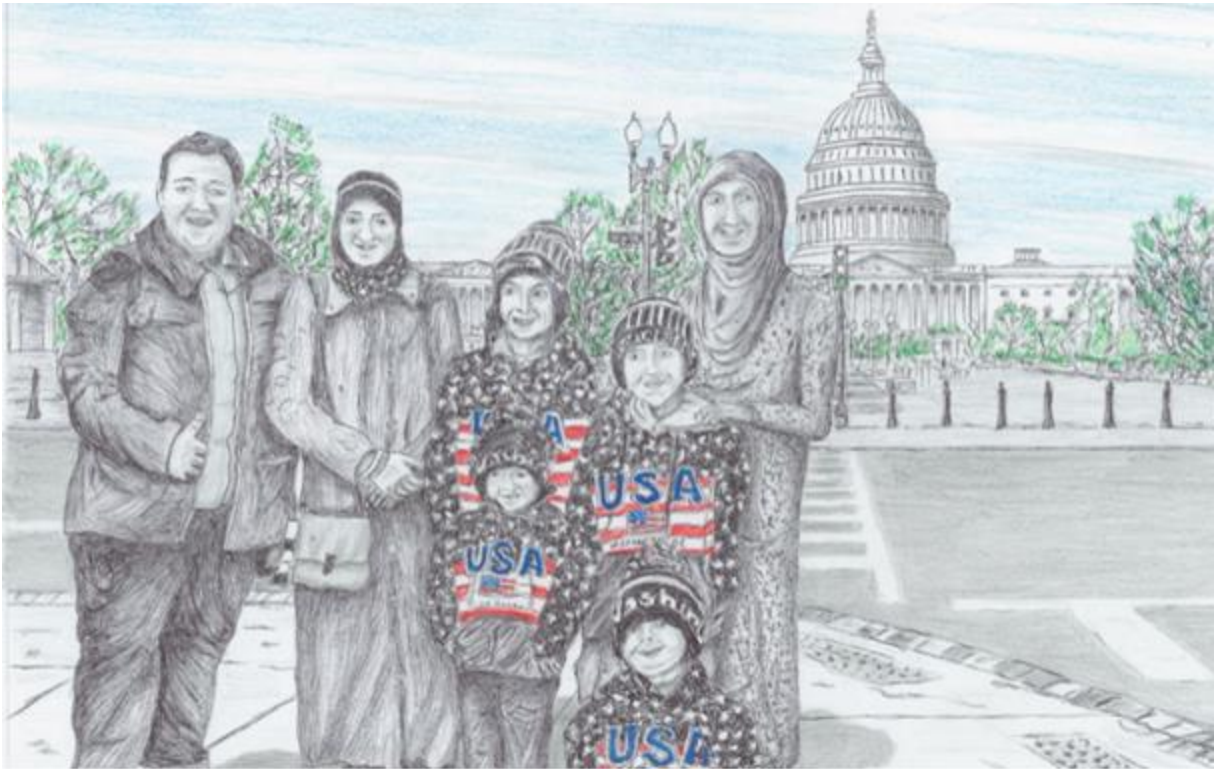


Illustration credit to BCICRR

WTS Board member Lois Heist is helping WTS partner with the Bucks County Interfaith Coalition for Refugee Resettlement (BCICRR) to sponsor an Afghan refugee family expected to arrive in January. There will be a need for drivers, child care, and language instruction. If you are interested in volunteering in these areas or in other ways, please contact Lois Heist at boardmemberlh@welcomingthestranger.org, or check out the BCICRR newsletter at <https://bcicrr.wildapricot.org>.

In December, we will welcome a new Administrative Assistant to our WTS team.

Mary Keeler has decided to turn the administrative reins over to someone else so that she can enjoy her hard-earned retirement. **Thank you, Mary,** for your dedication and consistent support of our students, our volunteers and our organization. **Kathy Kraeck,** one of our volunteer ESL teachers, has agreed to step into Mary's shoes and take on the position of Administrative Assistant.



Mary Keeler

Kathy Kraeck

Kathy has been deeply and extensively involved with an array of local area nonprofits during her more than twenty years in Bucks County. She has been a communications coordinator and mobilizer, a classroom facilitator and art appreciation teacher, and the vice president of a foundation. She has taught intermediate English classes for Welcoming the Stranger for five terms and will continue to teach classes as she undertakes her administrative responsibilities. **Please join us in welcoming Kathy as Welcoming the Stranger's new administrative assistant!**

Meet Board Member Eileen Phillips



Fifteen years ago this month, WTS founder Rev. Sturgis Poorman spoke at St. John's United Methodist Church and sparked Eileen Phillips' interest in becoming a volunteer ESL teacher.

"Working with Welcoming the Stranger really struck a chord with me," Eileen recalls. "I thought it would be a wonderful way to honor my paternal grandparents who immigrated to the USA in December 1922 when my grandmother was well into her pregnancy with their first child. Though my grandparents died before I was born, I've always admired their courage to forge ahead in a new country where they didn't speak the language."

Eileen began teaching with WTS in 2007 and continued tirelessly until the pandemic halted in-person classes in 2020. She also served as Treasurer from 2009 to 2020, employing skills from her background in bookkeeping and tax return preparation.

Over the years, Eileen has followed Sturgis Poorman's example of forming relationships with students and finding meaning in those connections. She enjoys

hearing about students' reasons for coming to the USA, getting to know them, and broadening her own perspective.

"When my students thank me for helping them with English, I let them know just how very much I, in turn, learn from them! I enjoy hearing about their families here and in their native countries, customs from their home countries, and dreams for their lives in America," Eileen says. "I've even tried to learn a few words in their language. Once, students invited a few tutors to their home for a Chinese 'hot pot' meal since we had never heard of that before. The meal was delicious! Their son played some songs for us on his guitar and piano, and we learned how to properly serve tea."

Recalling past excursions with students to Reading Terminal Market, the Philadelphia Flower Show, and local restaurants, Eileen eagerly anticipates the return of in-person classes and events.

"A highlight for me each year is the International Dinner," Eileen shares, referring to WTS' prominent annual fundraiser. "The students prepare delicious dishes from their native countries to share with WTS donors, teachers, and volunteers. It's such an uplifting evening when the students share their stories. Although I'm exhausted by the time I go home, I'm so invigorated by being involved with this organization that does such great work for our students and community."

Eileen lives in Southampton, PA with her husband Dennis and continues as an active member of St. John's UMC. Welcoming the Stranger commends Eileen for her dedication to our mission, her leadership over many years, and her devotion to the students whose lives she's touched. Thank you, Eileen!

To make a donation, please click below. Thank you!

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