

# Stories behind the Vision of English Language Partners of Wisconsin

by

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## STORY #1

*I would LOVE to get to know people of other cultures, to share with them and to help them if I can. But I don't know how to meet people from other cultures. I don't know how to get started.*

This is what *Susan* said to me in 1995, after my husband had preached a sermon about reaching across cultures to show Christian love. I realized that my life had been blessed with opportunities to learn how to connect with people from all over the world. Even before I married and accompanied my husband to Zambia, I had lived in another country.

## STORY #2

Hero

My hero is a strong survivor.  
No other person is as strong of heart.  
She is my understanding of the World.  
Other heroes can be hard-hearted.  
My hero is as kind as they come.

Her embrace is like a warm, summer  
breeze grasping the trees.  
She gives me the respect I need every day.  
The sight of her is the sight of a rainbow,  
all bright and colorful.  
This person is the door to my future.  
This one person is the guide to my right path.

My hero is the best  
Because I know she will always be there  
for me—through good times  
and bad times,  
My hero, my beautiful mother.

*Karen M.* (used with permission)

In 2000, when working towards my masters degree in TESOL, I set up a six-week class that was the prototype of ELPW's program model. One of my students was *Elena*. One evening, her fellow students showed me this poem written by her daughter. As I read it aloud, *Elena* beamed with pride.

*Karen's* mother was born in Mexico to a very poor family. Non-literate in Spanish, she had attended only three weeks of school. She could not speak or read English. In 2000, she participated with great enthusiasm in my English class even though she could not read any of the text.

In 2001, she became my participant for my master's thesis research. During 21 interviews, she described how her efforts to become educated had been thwarted her whole life, beginning in her childhood. Here is her answer to the question, "What is your earliest memory?"

*Yo recuerdo que quería ir a la escuela. Y mi papá no me dejó. A los ocho años, yo tenía que trabajar por seis años. Sí, a los ochos años yo tenía que trabajar en una casa. Limpiar, tender camas, todo.*

I remember that I wanted to go to school. And my father wouldn't let me. When I was eight years old, I had to go to work for six years. Yes, when I was eight years old, I had to work in a house. Housework, making beds, everything. (#2, p. 1)

After *Elena* married *Pedro*, they came to the U.S. as migrant workers. *Elena's* mission in life was to make sure her children had the education that had been withheld from her.

One summer, while working in a cannery, *Elena* found the community she was looking for. *Pedro* wanted to go back to Texas to his parents. *Elena* dug in her heels.

*Él se quedó porque yo me iba a quedar aquí con los niños y yo le dije, «¿Qué prefieres? ¿Mamá o nosotros?» Y él dijo, «No. Ustedes.» Por eso se quedó pero no quería quedarse. . . . Yo me siento mejor aquí que allá. Hay más educación y [los niños] tienen más futuro para salir adelante.*

He stayed because I was going to stay here with the children and I said to him, “Who do you prefer? Your mother or us?” And he said, “No. You.” That is why he stayed but he did not want to stay.... I feel better here than [in Texas]. Here there is more education and [the children] have more of a future to get ahead. (#21, p. 12)

Elena wanted to stay in this Midwestern town because it had a private school. Because she was working three jobs to pay the tuition, she never had quality time with her children. In fact, four of her five children lost their ability to understand and speak Spanish, so Elena was no longer able to communicate with them.

*Porque es un poco más mejor que la pública porque les ponen más atención y cuando van muy bajos les ayudan mucho allí en la escuela. Y les ayudan para seguir adelante ... hay unas [Mexicanos] que yo conozco de sus hijos y sus hijos ya quitaron de la [pública] escuela. Se salieron ya.... Sé que hay muchas problemas allí; no les llaman atención o nada..*

[The private school] is a little better than the public [school] because they give them more attention and when they are behind, they help them a lot in the school. And they help them to continue forward. . . . There are some [Mexicanos] that I know whose children already quit the [public] school. They left already.... I know that there are many problems there, that [the children] do not get any attention. (#19, p. 11, 12)

Knowing how to speak English would have solved many problems in Elena’s life. She tried to go to ESL classes several times but had often been isolated by the teachers, who did not know what to do with her. The following description was typical of her experiences.

*Ella se sentaba a darme clases aparte.... Me ponía más allá ...para allá porque «tú no sabes y ellos saben más que tú.» ... Yo me sentía mal. Por eso ya no quería ir. Yo decía, «No. ¿Para qué si no más estoy bien lejos y no puedo hablar no puedo oír nada de lo que están haciendo?»*

She sat down to give me classes apart.... She put me farther away...over there because “you do not know and they know more than you...” I felt bad. For that I no longer wanted to go. I said, “No. For what, if I am far away and I cannot talk and I cannot hear anything of what they are doing?” (#18, p. 15)

Consequently, Elena had very low self-esteem, which further aggravated her classroom experiences.

*[Estoy enojado a mí misma] porque no puedo expresarme en la manera en que tengo que hablar...porque no puedo defenderme... porque soy muy burra.*

[I’m angry at myself] because I can’t express myself in the way I have to speak...because I can’t defend myself ... because I am very stupid. (#8, p. 6)

Literacy is NOT a pre-requisite for learning how to speak additional languages. There are multilingual people all over the world who do not read in any language.

It was not Elena’s fault that she had not learned how to speak English in her ESL classes. She was not being taught in the way she needed to learn.

After hearing Elena’s story, my goal was to work in a school where courageous, ambitious people like her would never be excluded, where the curriculum would start with their strengths and their ambitions.

No such school existed.

The program model I founded in 2003 brings together these two groups of people – those like **Susan** who are isolated in the U.S. dominant culture and do not know how to meet people from other cultures, and those like **Elena** who are isolated and excluded from the dominant U.S. culture because of their lack of English skills.

Over the years, I have heard many more stories as to why our program model fills a critical niche for immigrant communities. But it is Elena’s story that caused me to research how to teach literacy to adults in their first language and that shaped ELPW’s program model.

## ABSTRACT

### BARRIERS TO SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN THE ESL LITERACY CLASSROOM: THE EXPERIENCES OF AN UNSCHOOLED, NON-LITERATE ADULT

THOMPSON, BETH CORDES, M.A., *Minnesota State University-Mankato*, 2002, 178pp.

This case study proposed to discover why a Latina, who is unschooled and non-literate, has been unable to participate in adult ESL literacy classes. The data, which were collected from a series of ethnographic interviews, reveal that she employs a number of strategies to manage her life in the U.S. dominant society without first language or English language literacy skills. However, she is excluded from two major domains -- the driver's license bureau and the adult ESL literacy class -- because of the institutionalized literacy requirements in those domains. Without schooled literacy in her first or second languages, she cannot pass the written driver's license test. She cannot participate in multilevel, print-oriented adult ESL literacy classes because she does not have first language literacy skills. An ESL program that would best fit the needs of this student is proposed.

In 2002, this thesis was unanimously nominated by Minnesota State University--Mankato to represent the university for the Midwestern Association of Graduate Schools (MAGS) Distinguished Thesis Award.