

Back to Basics

"You know what's cool? Our names start with the same letter!"

With my green marker I drew two thick parallel lines and connected them with a neat horizontal line.

"H", she let the letter linger on her tongue. Her face wrinkled into a child-like smile. She had learnt her first English alphabet at the age of 35.

I volunteered at my local library two days a week. It was only because I had nothing else to do. I was fresh off the boat waiting for the immigration gods to approve my work visa. I missed working, but I was free from the shackles of the alarm clock. So I cooked elaborate meals, went on long, unhurried walks or read at the park till my husband got home.

For me, being a volunteer literacy tutor was like a justification for being a hausfrau. I did it only so that I could respond with something interesting to all those people who constantly prodded me with "What do you do all day?" The freedom to do whatever I wanted was amazing, but there were days when I felt like I was vanishing. Telling people that I helped adults learn to read and write made me hurt less. It was all for a selfish reason.

Helena and her daughters had fled Sierra Leone which was ravaged by the decade-long Civil War and come to the US, to safety. This single mother knew she had to get a job if she was to put food on the table. We were both new to this country. But unlike me, she didn't have the luxury of time and she couldn't read English.

The program matched Helena and me as learner and tutor. I made an ambitious lesson plan. I was confident that I would be able to teach her to read within a few months. We started with phonics. "A says Aa, B says buh." We practiced five letters each day. I sang to her and I showed her videos. She did wonderfully, repeating what I taught her, but she would forget everything by our next meeting. One step forward, two steps backward. I could tell she wasn't enjoying it.

One particularly frustrating day, she was a full hour late. I was about to leave when I saw her walking in, her pink quilted jacket bright against her clear dark skin and her glistening black hair in a tight topknot. I was annoyed, I was putting in all this effort to teach her, and she didn't even care to tell me she would be late.

"Helena, you're late! Why didn't you call me?" My annoyance was very clear.

"Sorry, but I lost my job today and I didn't have no money to charge my phone." Her voice was calm.

"I'm sorry, Helena, I had no idea." I felt like an idiot.

"It's okay, I look for another job tomorrow." She was smiling. Her optimism amazed me.

"Let's go for a walk and get some coffee. No studying today." She smiled at that too.

There was a sharp nip in the air that fall evening. We walked down the tree lined avenue that housed the library and waited on the sidewalk to cross the street. I pressed the push-to-walk button. From the opposite side, the "Don't Walk" sign shone bright and clear. But she didn't wait. She stepped onto the street, ready to dodge an approaching car.

"Helena, wait! You've got to wait for the 'Walk' sign to come on." I held her back.

"Where?" she looked at me, completely clueless.

It struck me then. She wasn't looking at the signal at all. She couldn't read it! I realized that I was taking the pedagogical approach to teach an adult to read.

"How do you get to work and to the library?" I asked.

"I take a bus."

"And how do you know where to get off?"

"I know I have to get off when the bus turns at the brown brick building."

I was amazed. She couldn't do the things we take for granted, like being able to read road signs, but her hardiness and optimism were incredible. Her life was tough, but she was happy to be here with her little girls, away from the war.

I now understood that she didn't need phonics first. She needed to be able to read road signs and bus route maps to make her life a tad easier. And just like that, volunteering became much more than something I did to pass time. I was responsible for making a difference in someone's life. My sense of purpose was back.

"Let's print a map of your bus route tomorrow and learn to read that." I finally knew what to do next.