John DiFava Reflects on the ESL Program

By Laura Mali-Astrue and Pam Manolakis

It’s John DiFava’s leadership role in 2009 that allowed the ESL Program for Facilities Department Service Employees to take off. As a first generation Italian-American, John’s family immigrated to the United States from southern Italy. Like all immigrants, they were in search of a better life. Growing up, John’s family valued the opportunities that America offered. They embraced the American way of life in every way and achieved the American dream.

John recalls his father saying “there was not a single Italian-English dictionary” in any library and that he could not afford to buy one. “That memory has resonated with me to this day. And when Nancy Kelly and Marlyse Lupis approached me with the ESL concept, I was immediately on board.”

The program is important to John because it provides a chance for new immigrants, America’s future, to gain the benefits that our country has to offer much more quickly by learning English.

“MIT is welcoming to new Americans and is a great place to work because the community cares.”

John also mentioned that ESL tutoring helps the employees to do their job more efficiently, and the customer benefits by the resultant improved work product. It also provides an opportunity for promotion. And he has underscored, “that continued support of the ESL Program shows that MIT is welcoming to new Americans and is a great place to work because the community cares.”

The English as a Second Language (ESL) Program for MIT Facilities Department Service Employees on campus helps employees who are not native English speakers improve their English communication skills and advance their careers.
As a graduate student, there is much more to the experience than the lab. Sometimes, some meetings, some interactions leave an indelible mark on how you perceive life, and this is one of them.

Every Tuesday night 11 PM, starting this Fall, I taught English for an hour as a part of an MIT initiative – English as a Second Language (ESL). This post is about my student, and his path to citizenship in the United States.

In those days in Baghdad, my student was still a middle schooler, scuttling through the academic chores to maximize his playtime. His future came crashing down prematurely in April 2003 when Saddam Hussein was hunted down, and Baghdad, his hometown, was suddenly not safe anymore.

Baghdad, a stronghold of the Sunni Muslims, started becoming too dangerous for him (Shia Muslim). This led him to wrap up his studies in Grade 10 and move to the south of Iraq in 2006. Incidentally, the bloodshed remained similar, just that the south was Shia-dominated. Fed up with the warring factions, he sought employment opportunities in the relatively peaceful Syria in mid-2007.

Syria – ca. 2007–2010
Doing odd jobs and somehow eking out enough to have a shelter and some food, he spent four years in the country, before being approached by a Catholic charity organization that sponsored his flight to the United States.

United States of America – January 2011–2017
Arriving into JFK, New York, he was welcomed with a snow emergency when his flight got diverted from Boston. When asking him about his initial reaction, his eyes light up and he summarizes the vast openness of the winter as, “No life, just white!”

Upon reaching Boston after being held up for two days in New York, he went to his temporary shelter in Lynn, MA. It was not a great start for him here. No word from his case worker, he was stranded without money or access to a telephone for more than a week. With the help of some neighbors who happened to be from Iraq, he managed to settle down.

Living out of an all-expenses paid for accommodation, USD $400 in-hand and food stamps, he scrambled through the first six months.

He landed his first job as a night-shift cleaner at Legal Sea Foods, Seaboard St. The shifts took a toll on his health, and he had to quit seven months into the job. He remained on unemployment benefits for another winter.

Working his way through PF Chang’s, Domino’s and other restaurants, he managed for another year. For the next two years, 2013-15, he worked for a micro-staffing company where he had pockets of work all around Massachusetts, doing painting, welding and grinding.

Finally, in 2015, he started at Bon Appetit at MIT, which he describes as “Nice work, nice pay, but not all year.” Being laid off for three months in summer and six weeks over the winter made it hard to pay the bills. Thus, two years into work at MIT, he asked his employer for a full-time opportunity.

At that time, he was directed to the Department of Facilities. During the conversation with me, he fondly remembers the names of the people at the administrative office – Tom, Maria, Felix – people who taught him to sign into the MIT website and helped in filling

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My Student

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out the online application. Interestingly, on the day after submitting his application, he received a call for an interview. As any other applicant, he was skeptical. Nonetheless he went in, and bagged the job.

On a detour from the conversation about jobs and his time in the U.S., I happened to ask him about his family. He blushes and mentions his marriage to his long-time girlfriend (now in Germany). He talks about how she is taking German lessons now. He reminisces how he met his daughter the last time in 2016 when she was 10 months old and stayed for her first birthday.

Suddenly, his tone changes. “My daughter died three months [ago]”. For two years, he was waiting for his U.S. citizenship application to go through so that he could visit his family without any hassle. But then in July 2018, when his daughter was involved in an accident by an ice-cream truck driver high on drugs, he had to rush. With moist eyes, he states how he always thought, “Maybe I die, she don’t see me. Now it changed.”

Today, he is a citizen of the United States of America, continues to work for Bon Appetit, from 7 AM to 3:30 PM, and the Department of Facilities, 11 PM to 7 AM, managing two jobs and pulling it off. He mentions with a chuckle that he is always 2-3 minutes late for his morning job, since one ends and the other starts at the same time.

When asked about his goal for the future as a part of an assignment, he completed the following exercise:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My goal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Finish English class</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I need to:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Buy house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Travel to Germany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. See my mom</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I will probably reach my goal in:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One year</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some of the Teachers of English

By Jim Eggleston

Some of the teachers of English
Algunos de los maestros de inglés
Are also learning new languages
También aprenden idiomas nuevas
They may be learning Spanish
Ellos pueden estar aprendiendo español
The language of Cervantes and Neruda
El idioma de Cervantes y Neruda
They may be learning German or French
Ellos pueden aprender alemán o francés
Or any of the world’s seven thousand tongues
O alguien de las siete mil de lenguas del mundo
But there is one language we all are learning
Pero hay una idioma que nosotros aprendemos
And that is the language of the future
Y que es el idioma del futuro

Upcoming ESL Events

Spring ESL program dates:
February 25 - May 17, 2019

Summer ESL program dates:
June 17 - July 26, 2019
One of the proudest moments in my experience of more than 26 years at MIT was not related to something I did. It was something my student in the ESL Program did. Audilia Fernandes won an MIT Excellence award and on June 20, 2018, I was there in Kresge Auditorium to see MIT’s Vice President and Treasurer, Israel Ruiz, present it to her.

I have worked with Audilia for several years. Her commitment, hard work and perfect attendance in her ESL lessons were obvious to me from the beginning. But I also noticed that’s how Audilia also approached her Facilities job as a custodian—with a smile, joy, and non-stop effort. When I walked through the halls of the Plasma Science and Fusion Center I could see how everything sparkled, from the bathrooms to the carpets to the glass doors. Audilia was so proud of her work, and when she sometimes walked me to the door when I left, she would often point out some pebbles on the carpet and note that she was coming back to clean them up. “This is like my house,” she would tell me.

When Audilia first told me in a lesson this spring that she was “winning an award,” in her humble way she didn’t tell me it was the MIT Excellence Award. She just said it was “an award” and that I could come to the ceremony. Thinking it was a small Facilities event, I told her when they gave her the award she might have to briefly speak when she received the award. Together we worked on three or four sentences she could say and she practiced them. She was nervous to speak in public but with her typical zeal, she worked hard on the speech.

When Nancy Kelly told me it was the Excellence Award, I came back early from a vacation to meet with Audilia. I told her this was a huge award that she would not have to give her short acceptance speech, and that she would just walk across the stage.

On June 20, Audilia and co-workers Manny Costa and Emily Scoppettuolo won a “Serving the Client Award” representing Team “E” for Excellence from MIT Facilities. Audilia walked across the stage. I felt like a parent must feel at graduation. Israel Ruiz gave her the award and then Audilia tapped him on the shoulder and asked if she could speak! She went up to the mic and gave her short speech from the heart, adding a line of her own, thanking Nancy Kelly and her teachers in the ESL Program. Her last line was delivered with a huge smile and sheer joy: “I LOVE MIT.” The audience applauded wildly and their reaction matched the comment written in the award about Audilia that “She is so loved that when she appears in the hallways, she is greeted like a rock star.” When Audilia stepped off the stage after receiving her award, President Ruiz stood up to greet her with a smile that matched hers.

I have learned far more from Audilia than she learned from me. Tutoring works both ways.
How did it all begin?

by Nancy Kelly and Marlyse Lupis

It was in the fall of 2007 that we met at the MIT Women’s League and started to discuss a possible project of starting an ESL program for the Service Employees at MIT.

Our ideas had come from different avenues. One of us had come across a program called “Habla” that graduate students were offering service employees at Stanford and thought this would be a wonderful program to start at MIT. The other had volunteered in an ESL program offered by the National Cathedral, in Washington DC for its service employees. Struck by how wonderful such a program was working there, why not try a similar program at MIT for our service employees?

After much deliberation and time spent talking to a number of people, we wrote to the head of Facilities at MIT, John DiFava, in February 2009, asking him if he had any interest in such a program for his employees. We received a response within minutes, saying YES! (“Great minds think alike”).

Under the auspices of the Women’s League, we started with a Pilot program in May 2009 for 13 employees. Classes and/or one-on-one tutoring were offered to employees working the day shift. Employees receive one hour paid leave twice a week to attend.

In fall 2009, the program expanded to accommodate employees working the evening shift, and in 2011 the program again expanded to include late night shift (3rd shift) employees, doubling the number of Facilities service staff employees attending ESL classes. In October 2014, the program became part of Human Resources. We are now a group of five coordinators, four of whom are volunteers, in addition to many volunteer tutors. The majority of these talented volunteers are MIT employees and graduate students, in addition to friends of MIT.

Our students—what to say about these remarkable participants?

Their zeal and enthusiasm to learn has been remarkable. We have seen them grow in confidence at work and additionally, achieve their learning goals from obtaining high school certification, to achieving Hoisting Licenses, to getting their American citizenship. They are also able to further help their own families at home and in the larger community.

We are so very proud of the accomplishments of all the students involved. The continued success of the program can only be achieved by the dedicated coordinators and volunteers, and more importantly the commitment of service staff employees. To all of you, we give our greatest thanks.

This year we celebrate the 10th anniversary of this program. So let us continue together to bring more opportunities to our service employees, and to build community at MIT.

It’s been a joy to be part of this endeavor!
English as a Second Language