



The Conversation

December 2020



Welcome Readers

It's our pleasure to deliver the first installment of *The Conversation* to your Inbox! This quarterly newsletter will keep you up to date on Welcoming the Stranger's activities, goals and accomplishments. Most of all, we look

forward to highlighting our dedicated volunteers and sharing our students' stories with you.

To say 2020 brought many changes would be an understatement. WTS was not exempt. In March, we hired a new Acting Executive Director, Patricia Lorenz (see a profile article below), and we offer a special greeting to two new staff members hired this fall: Mary Keeler as Administrative Assistant and Susan Roop as Program Coordinator. Welcome, Mary and Susan! And lastly, we want to acknowledge the overwhelming support of the WTS Board as we have transitioned not only over to a new team but to a new way of teaching.

Thank you so much for being a part of the Welcoming the Stranger family as we serve local refugees and immigrants. We hope you enjoy hearing the news that *your* support makes possible.



Patricia Lorenz: From Student to Director

As Welcoming the Stranger's new Acting Director, Patricia Lorenz has spent the past eight months learning the ropes of a new job while steering a growing nonprofit through an unprecedented pandemic. Day in and day out, Patricia does this with warmth, patience, precision, and a calm demeanor that belie the dramatic changes that characterized 2020.

"When the stay at home order was issued in March, we didn't even have the capability to answer the office phone line from home, let alone work 100% remotely and offer virtual classes online," Patricia recalls. "We had to work quickly to make the right changes to keep our programs and services running."

The Board of Directors moved swiftly to create a distance-learning committee and reached out to lead teachers to launch an alternative instructional model in April. As a team, Patricia and the distance-learning committee steered WTS from in-person to fully virtual classes for the first time in our history. From assessing students' access to devices and high speed internet, to securing Zoom licenses and ESL Library subscriptions, to training teachers on adapting to a virtual classroom, the distance-learning committee and Patricia have collaborated to skillfully maneuver WTS through each challenge and uncertainty.

"I am very grateful to the Board of Directors for their prompt response to the pandemic and for embracing the move to all-virtual classes," says Patricia. "I know it was extremely important to the Board and the teachers that our students continue to learn despite the shutdown. Now, as what we initially hoped might be short-lived has stretched into many months, we can't imagine any alternative! Our students would have been at a terrible disadvantage if all courses had been cancelled since March. Instead, we've been able to connect regularly and carry on with educating and encouraging hundreds of people."

Patricia knows first-hand the impact our classes make in immigrants' lives. After immigrating to the U.S. from Colombia ten years ago, Patricia and her husband discussed the best course of action for advancing her English skills and attaining her career goals. In Colombia, Patricia had directed human resources for large companies and taught at the National University of Colombia. At first, Patricia began seeking educational opportunities while working in retail jobs. She first came to WTS in 2016 as a student seeking greater fluency in English, and soon began helping around the office as a volunteer. In 2018 she joined the WTS staff in the position of administrator, applying her skills to enhance statistical reporting, create the first set of student guidelines, and contribute heavily to fundraising events. In March, when Executive Director Meg Eubank left to pursue other opportunities, the Board approved Patricia to assume the job of Acting Director.

“It hasn't been an easy year for anyone, but I've seen Patricia tackle daily hurdles and surprises with ingenuity and poise. She's compassionate, friendly, a strategic thinker, and a superb professional,” ESL teacher Connie Schwedes remarks. “Patricia embodies what we hope for all our immigrant and refugee students: to master the language skills needed to be successful in a new country. Patricia is an inspiration.”



WTS Distributes PA Immigrant Relief Funds

In the spring when the COVID pandemic caused so many businesses to close, the [Pennsylvania Immigration and Citizenship Coalition](#) (PICC) formed the PA Immigrant Relief Fund in order to provide \$800 in one-time emergency assistance to immigrants in dire need. When WTS, a member of the PICC, learned of the fund, we quickly signed on. Acting Director Patricia Lorenz sought referrals from volunteer teachers to ascertain which of our students were in greatest need. Thanks to strong trust between WTS leadership, volunteers and students, students felt safe disclosing personal matters. Staff members were able to vet each referral and present their information to the PICC. As a result, 19 WTS students each received \$800 from the PA Immigrant Relief Fund.



Training to use WTS's new distance learning module.

Volunteer Spotlight: Debby Hoffman

My name is Debby Hoffman. I've been with WTS for six years.

When COVID-19 hit, we were forced to stop our in-person classes. The loss was felt by all. In April WTS moved quickly to set up access to Zoom, and soon six of my students began to meet virtually with me twice a week. Beginning in September 2020, I was able to teach all of my students online.

WTS has had to almost totally reinvent itself in these past months and so have the volunteers. I had never used Zoom before, but WTS made it easy by providing training, the platform and incredibly useful tools such as ESL Library.

This pandemic experience has challenged us all, and I'm delighted the students are doing so well. It amazes me that a tiny, non-profit staff with many volunteers so nimbly revised its program model to an effective online

service. I am grateful to WTS for what it does to help students, volunteers, and the community.

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