

Community Profiles



Heather Hosick is a writer and educator who has found her niche in teaching English as a second language. She began her career in Korea teaching ESL to children. Now she teaches ESL in Kingston to teenagers and adults. What she finds personally rewarding is hearing so many unique stories from across the globe. By speaking to ESL students and professionals in our area, she discovers the stories in our own community.



JADE GARRISON

It's 9am on a Monday morning and Jade Garrison is in a LINC classroom teaching the English alphabet to newly arrived refugees. Some are educated professionals who cannot work because of the language barrier, some have been to primary or high school, and some have no education at all. She is teaching them a completely new way to communicate, which requires sensitivity and patience. Her career exemplifies how the teaching of English as a Second Language is at its core more than teaching the structure of the language. Jade assists many people new to Canada in adapting to a new country and a new life.

Entering a Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program is one of the first steps for many refugees who arrive in Kingston. Since September, LINC has been receiving some of the Syrian refugees that Canada is accepting, but they are only a part of the group that takes literacy classes. The program caters to a mix of students coming from a variety of situations. Some are here because they have followed other family members who might be studying or working; others have received refugee status after escaping from war or other traumatizing situations in countries such as Burma or the Congo. Jade Garrison has been teaching literacy at LINC for eight years.

When Jade was a young girl she would tell people it was her dream to be an English teacher. She had fallen in love with literature, reading and writing. She labels herself today as a bibliophile and, not able to be away from books for long, admits that she also works at the Kingston Frontenac Public Library. At Queen's University she majored in English literature. It was in her head that she would search out a career in the public school system. Teaching English as a Second Language was not even on her radar.

In 1998 Jade started her family. At that time teacher's college did not seem like a viable option. It was a friend working for the LINC program through Kingston Literacy & Skills who introduced her to the idea of teaching ESL. Knowing that Jade loved travelling, culture and language, her friend was sure it would be a good fit. To test the waters Jade began volunteering for the conversation partners program at Queen's University. This instantly connected her to people around the world. It wasn't long before she enrolled in a distance education program at the University of Saskatchewan, which earned her a CERTESL certificate and allowed her to teach ESL in many programs across the country.

Jade's first experience with refugees at the literacy level involved a family from Myanmar. She was taken by how they soaked in Canadian culture. Her classroom at the time had a window that faced the road. A Tim Hortons truck drove by and on the side was a picture of a sandwich and donuts. Jade was surprised when her students asked her what they were. These students had spent much of their lives seeking refuge in the jungle. They had never eaten a sandwich before. They next day she brought in donuts, and the radiant expression on their faces when they bit into a jelly-filled donut communicated pure joy. Jade recalled the morning before when Timbits had probably been rolling around in her van, left there by her young children. So many classroom experiences like this one have helped Jade stay mindful of what we view as life's tiny pleasures. Perhaps this is in part why now she can't imagine doing anything other than teaching ESL.

Jade wears many hats; the profession involves not simply language instruction. Social work plays a large role, although it might not be obvious in the job description. Some days students who have come from difficult situations bring their psychological trauma into the classroom. Allowing them to share their stories is helpful and turns the small community that is her classroom into a support system. Furthermore, teachers help students set up appointments, access community resources such as public transportation, and connect them with immigrant services.

What stands out the most for Jade about her students who are refugees is their eagerness to learn. Attendance is always high, helped by the child minding centre on the LINC site, which allows parents to focus on their studies while still having their young children nearby. Many times Jade has watched her students' eagerness to learn reach the point of frustration. What they really want is to find stability as quickly as possible. They want to integrate into society, get a job, and live their lives in freedom. Language throws up a barrier that can appear insurmountable.

At LINC Jade has witnessed newcomers progress from the very basics to a level of communication that enables them to integrate into their community. As an ESL teacher she has witnessed the power that comes with having control of a language as a deeply satisfying outcome for a lover of words.