

Amy Lough

Where: Hardy County ESOL Classroom

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Interviewer: Emily Hilliard

Transcription: Emily Hilliard

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Amy Lough (b. 1975, Murray, Kentucky) is an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teacher in Moorefield, in Hardy County, West Virginia. The majority of her students are Haitian, Burmese, Eritrean, Ethiopian, Puerto Rican, and Dominican immigrants or refugees, most of whom work at Pilgrim's Pride chicken plant in Moorefield. In this interview Lough speaks about her work as an ESOL teacher, her relationship as a mentor/ally to some of her students, the Moorefield community, and more.

EH: Emily Hilliard

AL: Amy Lough

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EH: Okay, so why don't you introduce yourself and tell me who you are, when and where you were born.

AL: Okay, can we pause for a minute?

EH: Yeah!

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EH: Okay, go ahead. I can hold it (the mic). It's heavy.

AL: So my name and what else?

EH: When and where you were born.

AL: Okay. My name is Amy Lough, and I was born in Murray, Kentucky in 1975.

EH: So why don't you tell me about your job and your work here and what it entails.

AL: So I am the adult English teacher here in Hardy County, West Virginia. We see ESOL English for Speakers of Other Languages. It used to be ESL, English as a Second Language but a lot of our students, this might be their third or fourth language so it's not always the second language they are learning.

And the population of students here are all adult learners 18 years or older. A lot of 'em work in the chicken industry here a lot of it's night shift work so we have day classes that they attend here and a lot of it's functional English and speaking skills, sometimes we get higher level, but we have another program if they want to do higher level English and start working towards higher education that they go to. But it's all free. Both the English classes and the high school equivalency classes and things like that here. It's adult education but it's free.

EH: How did you get involved in this work?

AL: I moved here in 2015 and wanted to get involved with the immigrant community here and I met a Puerto Rican pastor who was here for 2 years doing outreach, missionary work, translation through the West Virginia Baptist Association I believe and we started doing international potlucks where we just wanted the international community to start coming together, meet local community members, kind of as a bridge building thing. And I also contacted Catholic Charity Workers West Virginia Office of Immigration and Resettlement and asked how I could help in that community because they don't have an office here but they do resettle immigrants here. And have immigrant services here. So I started volunteering with them and because of that work someone contacted me and said they needed a teacher for English for Speakers of Other Languages classes here and they knew I was already involved in that community so they encouraged me to interview for the position and I did and that's how I got this job.

EH: So was this classroom already here when you came on board?

AL: No, we were actually borrowing a conference room from another agency the first year I did it. In the same building that we are in now. We had an office space but not a classroom. So we kinda had to set up,

tear down every day. But they wanted to build up the program and it had been transient. It had been at the local library, it had been at a church here. At one point it had been at Pilgrim's the factory and I knew if we wanted to build it up, get more students that we kinda needed our own classroom, the same space, people knew it was here and existed. So 2018 they built us our own classroom in this building.

EH: Tell me about your students. You don't have to name names, but tell me who they are and where they're from and what you know of what their lives are like.

AL: Our biggest population of students are Haitian, Central American, Burmese, Eritrean and Ethiopian, but we also have South American students, Puerto Rican and Dominican and Ethiopian. The Burmese and Eritrean students are usually resettled refugees. A lot of the Haitians came after the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. Some of them haven't been here the whole time but have lived other places but came here to work at the factory. A lot of my Central Americans and South Americans came to work at Pilgrim's or some subsidiary of the chicken industry here. They're, 99% of them are here because of the chicken industry. Some of them have students in the public schools. They're parents and those tend to be more involved in the community because they, their kids go to schools, their kids play sports and things like that.

EH: And what are the cultural resources if any for these communities?

AL: There's really not much. We have our classes and the public schools have ESL teachers. I think there's, I don't know the numbers. I think there's one or two at the high school that pools students individually or helps in different classrooms if there's a need. I think they have more of the ESL in the elementary and primary levels. They get more intervention at those early levels. So I'm not sure in the public schools how much staff they have. But really that's the only language services I know of here. Some of the churches have reached out to the immigrant community. There's a couple churches that will have bilingual services, but that's mostly Spanish and English. And then there are just some Spanish services and some Burmese services that I know of, but they usually borrow a space from a local church and the local church lets them use it when they're not having their regular services.

EH: And you were saying there aren't very many translation services available here?

AL: No, I think a lot of them have you know, a call-in or hotline they can use if they need it but most people will bring someone that speaks better English from their language group with them to help for doctor's appointments or if they go to the DMV. There's just a lot of different languages being spoken here and not translators for them.

EH: How do you see...so this town is under 2,500 people, is that right?

AL: I'm not sure.

EH: Yeah. Well how do you see integration into the town here by those communities?

AL: I think it depends. I think everybody kind of tends to keep in their own circles more, in their own language groups. There are some pockets where there's interaction among the different cultures and language groups. A lot of that is like in this English class where we have a lot of the different--and at their work environments. But they say sometimes there too, they keep in their different language groups on breaks and at lunch and things like that. So probably the schools is the main place where they're all interacting? Maybe at some of the churches. I think that's really it. (laughs) I think maybe some of the parents, again, that have kids in the school system because they have to, they might interact with some of the other parents when there's school activities.

08:07

EH: Do you need to go? Okay. And you were saying as far as cultural community events and social functions, a lot of that seems to happen in private homes?

AL: Yes. They do keep their cultural identities in a lot of ways but it is more in their homes and you know, they invite friends over from their, the same countries usually. They do their food and gatherings and religious ceremonies usually in their homes, yes.

EH: And so students, a lot of them work night shift and then come to English class and it's sort of a voluntary thing to come here but really quite a commitment considering their shifts?

AL: Yes, so I would say 90% of my students are working night shift at the chicken factory. Some of them do other parts of the job--like some of them do the catching of the chickens at the farms or cleaning the machinery and things at the factory and those tend to be different shifts. But the majority are working night shift, especially if they have children in the public schools because then that allows them to be home during the day and get their kids to school and from school and yes, we have classes 3 days a week. We're adding a 4th day so they have a little time to go home in the mornings, shower, eat and then they come here, well if they're morning class, which is our biggest class. It's 3 hours starting next week 4 days a week. And you know, they are very tired and it is a commitment but they're pretty dedicated to coming, the ones that chose to come. It is voluntary. We do offer free classes.

EH: I assume that there's a lot of different levels like skill levels of English so how do you kind of tailor that? What's the approach you take--it's like almost a one-room school house situation. (laughs)

AL: That is very true and it's probably one of the biggest challenges is I get some students who have just come here and don't speak any English and some of them, their languages don't even use our alphabet, so you're starting with teaching the ABCs literally. Sometimes I get students who never got an opportunity to go to school in their home countries and sometimes are even illiterate in their own language, so we can't always even use translation or dictionaries that translate. But then I have really advanced level students who want to maybe just work more on speaking and pronunciation and some of them have degrees in their home country, so it is a very broad range. I'm lucky to have a teaching assistant so usually the lower level learners are you know, beginning literacy learners for English. A lot of times I have my teaching assistant pull them. We have another work space and work with them more intensely on some of the basics. But I do really try to touch at all levels during the class. We don't get to a lot of really high level things and we have another teacher that does regular adult education at Eastern College here and if they want to work on a high school equivalency or get certain certifications, she can work with them on that, and it can be a bridge then to going to the local community college. But we try to do a lot of speaking practice and writing and like I said, functional English with them. But we do also touch on a lot of the grammar and we do get to some higher level grammar. Usually when I'm doing the higher level stuff, that's when I have my teaching assistant maybe pull the beginning literacy students and work with them on something different.

EH: Do you get asked to do things outside of class, like kind of be an ally for other events or you know, if they need to go to the doctor, DMV, or something like that?

12:34

AL: We help them a lot with things like that. Usually within classroom hours or maybe on our lunch break if they need a call, a doctor, or if they have a form they need to fill out that they're having trouble with, we are always willing to help with that in class. I do get called from local community services more if they're having an outreach event. Like the public schools when they're having outreach events, we've

set up tables because it's helpful for them if the parents of the students become English proficient. It's easier for them to communicate with a parent. So the local school system reaches out to us. DHHR locally reaches out to us with asking about translation services or when our classes are, if they have anyone come to them. And I've been, we've been reached out to with a group that teaches citizen classes and has grant money for that that would like to do that in our area and is looking for volunteers, so we do get contacted pretty regularly from...and we are again, they know if they need help calling someone we can do it in class with them or most recently we had one that had never ordered anything online and needed to try to order something online so we--Chris sat with her and walked her through that process (laughs) so sometimes it's things like that. Yeah. How to use a credit card online and things like that. (assistant speaks from across the room) Yeah.

EH: What do you feel like you have learned from your students?

AL: I think it's taught me a lot about resiliency. Just you know, I don't know a lot of their personal stories. Sometimes they give us little bits of information but just their dedication I think to their lives here and kind of the strength that has taken--to be here--and their work schedules and coming to class. Like I realized, I don't think I could do it. Like the kind of schedules that they keep. They're just so dedicated to making a life for themselves here that they've made a lot of sacrifices so I think I've been taught resiliency, I've been taught to be very flexible (laughs) because I have worked in an English classroom in a special education setting, which I feel like helped me in a way because I learned how to differentiate instruction and worked at different levels--that's what I did in Maryland as a teaching assistant. But definitely flexibility because sometimes you try a certain lesson or things and they just don't go over well and don't work. They, I think having a sense of humor about things and they do too and that helps us all. (laughs) So I would say those are the major things I've learned.

EH: And I guess it sounds like you've formed some personal relationships too. How has it kind of enriched your life?

15:47

AL: That's really how it started, with some personal relationships that developed in the immigrant community even before I started teaching English classes. And a lot, sometimes it's referrals--people I already have relationships with say, "You know you need to go to English classes. That's my friend teaching (laughs)." Or, so actually a lot of it is personal and word of mouth, how we get students. And really that was when I first started feeling like I belonged to this community was getting involved in the immigrant community, 'cause they were very open and welcoming and I think just if you're open to them and want to get to know them and develop relationships, they're the same way, but sometimes you have to take the first step. And moving here in 2015 and not knowing a whole lot of people it was really some of my first friendships were with the people in the immigrant community here.

EH: What do you hope for your students? And I think that's like what you hope they take away from class, but what do you hope for their lives in general?

AL: Well you know my biggest goal is to give them functioning English, so survival English I call it, so they can get around here and not struggle. But we do an interview with the students when they first come--there's paperwork--but we always sit and ask them what their long-term, short term and long-term goals are. So once your English improves, what would you like to do? And if you could choose, we do a career exploration activities with them and try to kinda gauge what their goals are here. And anyway we can help them with that. We have some programs with different career vocabularies and information about different careers and if we know there's something in particular they're interested in, we let them use those programs. Some of them, their goal is to get their citizenship. We had a student get his citizenship last

year. We have study materials, we can guide them in that process. We refer if they need any kind of immigration help, 'cause that process can be complicated and paperwork for immigration. We refer them to Catholic charity workers that does low cost immigration services and we just try to gauge what their needs are. I for most of them just hope that they're able to do something fulfilling here in the long run and feel welcome and part of the community but I feel like working at Pilgrim's and coming here is the first step but if there are goals beyond that we really try to help them with that and let them know what's available and what resources and what educational opportunities are available.

EH: How would you describe the Moorefield community to people who have never been here?

19:09

AL: (laughs) Well I mostly lived in Grant County and actually just moved into Moorefield this fall. I was in the neighboring county. Like I said I feel like, it's not that people are necessarily unfriendly, but I feel like it, people really keep in their familial groups, their families and maybe a close knit group of friends. There's not a lot of transplants even. Chris and I are transplants, the 2 teachers here (laughs). But there's not a lot of people reaching across any cultural, ethnic dividing lines I guess. I feel like in a way again, people aren't on the surface level necessarily unfriendly, but people just kinda keep to themselves, so if you move here, even me moving here from outside of the area, it was really hard even for me to kinda make connections outside of just surface level connections. And I think there's a little bit of suspicion about anyone from the outside. Not in all places, and again I think some of the churches are the ones maybe reaching out more than other groups. Not all the churches, but there's a few that have opened their doors to the immigrants and offered a space, and the schools. But I think people just kinda--I like to say like it's not a very pretentious area. People just are who they are, both the natives and the immigrant community. They're not trying to be anything but (laughs) a lot of it just revolves around work and family and both the cultures, the native culture and the immigrant culture. But you know, a lot of people complain about the lack, even just lack of things to do and cultural opportunities in general here. So there's not a lot of that--the music, arts, things like that here also.

EH: You said there's not a coffee shop. Is there some kind of local hangout?

AL: You know there's kinda local restaurants that probably a lot of people--I think it's called the Sunset Restaurant that's the one I feel like the one where locals go--it's open for breakfast and lunch. You know and the locals drink coffee there and you know, get breakfast but not that I'm really aware of. Mullins Restaurant in town--they have the most of anything just as far as activities because they do a Bluegrass jam on Thursday nights. They have live music on Friday nights. It's a restaurant but it has like a bar area and a deck. They do karaoke, they do different events, you know, that's the place really that has the most going on for the community.

EH: I had a question on the tip of my tongue, and then it just went away. Oh, do you feel like this is a company town?

AL: I do. I mean the chicken industry is the predominant industry here. And I don't personally have a lot of background about the factory but most of the people I know are somehow involved in the chicken industry here, whether they're local farmers that have the chicken houses or they work at Pilgrim's in one level or another whether it's line workers up to management and human resources. It is the main industry here. You know Moorefield would probably collapse if the chicken industry was not here. 'Cause we don't even have a hospital system in Moorefield. Sometimes that's a big employer in a rural area, but I think probably the schools and the chicken--there is American Woodmark, which is a cabinet making factory near the college, so those are the 2 big factories here. And other than the school system, there's not really any large employers here.

EH: And there is a community college?

AL: There is--Eastern West Virginia Community and Technical College.

EH: And does the factory sponsor any cultural events? You said they used to have soccer teams. Do they do any kind of social or cultural programming?

AL: I don't know of any. I think they do parties at the holidays, like a Christmas party for their employees, and I know at Thanksgiving they give them all a whole turkey and things like that. I feel like I can't comment too much on that, 'cause I just don't know. I don't hear about anything. I've had students tell me that they used to have a soccer league and soccer tournament at the factory with the different workers and they would divide up in their countries if they wanted and play each other in soccer tournaments. And that is a big thing that a lot of them do on the weekends here just for fun is soccer. You go by the park on the weekend, a lot of them are playing soccer. So that's kind of a thing I think that unites some of them. They all like soccer (laughs). So they play together on the weekends in the park.

EH: Let's see, I think those are most of my questions. Is there anything you would like to add or that I should have asked about?

25:01

AL: I can't think of anything, you know Pilgrim's I think actively recruits in Puerto Rico. I had Puerto Rican students that saw an advertisement for Pilgrim's in their country. Like in the newspaper and you know, they're already citizens, it's easy for them to come here and work. I'm not sure about other countries and how they go about recruiting. But again like they always need workers and they're always hiring so you know, that's why most of them are choosing, the immigrant community is choosing to come to Moorefield is to work these jobs and you know it's decent pay and they get health insurance and benefits. From what a lot of them are used to in their home countries. But it is very hard work (laughs) but most of them are very hard workers. That's what I'm learning from that community. And they don't complain. Sometimes they come to class and they hurt, you know, they have aches and pains from the repetitive motion of factory work and line work, but they don't complain.

EH: Wow.

AL: Yeah.

EH: Oh, and refugee resettlement. Was that chosen here because of...there's an employer?

AL: My understanding is yes, that's why Moorefield was chosen, because there are jobs readily available and they can get on their feet financially almost immediately when they come here, yes. And have benefits, you know, health insurance.

EH: And do you know like especially for Puerto Rican workers or students, is there an intention to return back home or you're not sure or you don't know?

AL: I'm not really sure. I know there have been some that came and worked for a while and went back to Puerto Rico or they came here for a while and then moved somewhere else within the US, I think. There's all different situations there with the Puerto Rican population.

EH: Anything else?

AL: Can't really think of anything (laughs)

EH: Well thank you so much!

AL: You're welcome.

EH: That's great.

27:30

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