

Voices from the Field

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VOICES FROM THE FIELD

The purpose of this annual feature is to spotlight practitioners from the Indiana education community who are serving English learners of all ages and purposes. In addition to providing insights into current practices, challenges, and opportunities, this column also serves as an archive of current challenges, opportunities, promising practices, advocacy activity, and responses to policies as they change over time.

In this article, we introduce Andrea Cramer. Andrea is the founder and executive director of Neighbor to Neighbor, a grassroots nonprofit located in South Bend, Indiana. Prior to establishing Neighbor to Neighbor, Andrea earned a degree in ESL from Moody Bible Institute in Chicago. While studying in Chicago, Andrea also taught ESL courses at Malcom X. College and tutored in the church basement of a Polish immigrant community. She has also taught at a community college and middle school ESL in Indiana and Texas.

The move from the Midwest to Texas was disorienting for Andrea. A fellow Midwesterner in Waco kindly took Andrea under her wing and helped her adjust to an unfamiliar culture and lifestyle. While in Waco in 2014, Andrea experienced some of the upheaval of the arrival of Syrian refugees and increased arrivals of immigrants and refugees entering the United States at the Mexican border. But it was a question from her then five-year-old son about

refugees that caused her to realize how little she knew about refugees and what causes the “push and pull” of people moving around the world in response to world events. Andrea began a self-organized crash course on refugees and their experiences entering the United States.

A turning event in this exploration was a weekend of the family volunteering with Catholic Charities at the Mexican border. Here Andrea observed the loneliness and isolation of many refugees. She also discovered the intersection of her teacher identity with her desire to provide relational supports for newly arrived refugees as they seek to build new lives in a new country. When her husband, David, took a new position at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS) and a local church in South Bend, Keller Park Church, Andrea noticed a significant gap in services for refugees, migrants and immigrants, and asylum seekers in South Bend and the idea of establishing Neighbor to Neighbor was born. Andrea says the organization exists to “offer mutual friendship to people be a bridge between community longtime community members and newcomers. and to mitigate the isolation that newcomers face”. The nonprofit addresses this goal through three main categories of focus: relationships, advocacy, and education.

Andrea and Susan met recently to find out more about her perspectives on her role and on current opportunities and challenges. The interview questions will be presented in **bold**, and Andrea’s responses are presented in *italics*.

What opportunities are you discovering in your role? What has surprised you most about these opportunities? Where do these opportunities seem to be leading right now?

For the first four years, it was only me. And last year we were able to hire someone as our volunteer and community coordinator. We also found someone to handle our media and other

communications, as well as some case management. It is good to have people helping now to fill in the gaps. Next we hope to hire someone with development experience who can help us find case managers, educators, and advocacy specialists. But I have been surprised to discover that the advocacy piece is my favorite part of my role. It has inspired me to pursue a peace studies degree at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary where my husband teaches.

What challenges are you discovering in your role?

I don't want the organization to be personality-driven, so I don't want to be the executive director forever. I think it needs to be led by someone with lived experience as an immigrant at some point, so I'm trying to do some succession planning for the organization to position us well for the future. We are part of a national network called Hello, Neighbor that connects us to organizations throughout the US. These connections have helped us find grant opportunities. For example, we were able to get a national grant to support us as Afghans were being evacuated to the US and moving to our region. It is surprisingly challenging to get local funding because St. Joseph County has per capita one of the largest numbers of nonprofits in the country. So local funding is very competitive. There is another organization called La Casa de Amistad which has been serving now for fifty years in the community. La Casa serves primarily Latino youth and offers a legal clinic we send clients to on referral. We have a great partner relationship with La Casa.

What trends or patterns have you observed in Neighbor to Neighbor in the past six months?

Currently ESL and literacy development are high priorities. But finding experienced folks who can tutor is challenging, so we are also training new people to do this tutoring.

What state and/or federal policies are uppermost on your mind these days?

The work of refugee resettlement is such a precarious thing. Each new administration has its own policies, caps on immigration numbers, and where refugees will actually end up gets changed every time a new administration takes office. Whatever systems or programs were in place get dismantled and are being rebuilt. Meanwhile there is a new crisis somewhere as we currently see with Afghans, Ukrainians, Venezuelans, and others. At this time in history, more people are on the move than ever before due to conflict, our government systems are in a shambles.

In addition, we see an increasingly suspicious American population who have consumed rhetoric and untrustworthy news sources. So this work can be dangerous. This work is about caring for refugees, but also about educating the public on who their neighbors are, how they are already contributing to our community, and that their kids are going to school with our kids. It is also about developing cultural competency and combating racial biases. Most US citizens believe being undocumented is a criminal offense, but in reality, it is a civil offense. There is a lot of misinformation out there. Once we connect people to new neighbors and these new neighbors have a face, it is amazing how perspectives can change.

Do you sometimes feel like you are drowning? How do you decide where to put today's energy?

Yes, this can be difficult. I am thankful to work closely with my board president. He reminds me regularly that Neighbor to Neighbor can only do a sliver of the work. We have to trust and hope and believe that our public schools are doing their parts and that other community partners are doing their parts, too. Trying to be all things to all people would be a disservice to folks.

We have to let them try and fail. It often takes painful failures for people to eventually learn and to have the dignity of doing things on their own. We in the US are a very individualistic culture, but many refugees come from a community or collective culture, so adjusting is really hard. I think this gets lost sometimes amid all the work. I sometimes find myself frustrated when after working with someone for more than a year, they still want one of us to accompany them to the grocery store. I think they ought to be able to go on their own, but then I realize they want to do it in community.

I have also learned from someone in the network that if someone comes in to complain about the free couch that we gave them and moved for them, it might not really be about the couch. 9 times out of 10, it has nothing to do with the couch. It is that they have lost control of almost everything in their lives, but the couch is something they can control, and it becomes a symbol. My colleague says, "Instead of playing it down and telling them not to worry about it, mirror their frustration and agree with them that this couch really is terrible. Let's think together: where else can we get you a couch? What kind of couch do you want?" And my colleague says that 9 times out of 10, the person says, "Oh, no. Really the couch is fine." We have to be able to decode what is really going on underneath this complaint? Most Americans expect refugees to just be permanently grateful. Being permanently grateful is exhausting, unreasonable, and unfair.

One strategy I have is to give myself permission to leave unscheduled time on my calendar each day for the unexpected. And then if by the grace of God, there is unscheduled time, I can think about succession planning or whatever is needed.

What kind of adult programming does Neighbor to Neighbor provide?

We have an Afghan women's group. We call it a Craft and Chat, but it's more than that. We meet at our local downtown library, which is gorgeous. We have a private room. It's really dignifying. The preschool age kids that aren't in Head Start come with their moms. So we've got infants to 4 year olds in there with us in the library. We have our own private story hour.

So originally, we thought, maybe this will be a time that the kids will be distracted enough that the mothers can really focus on a concentrated ESL lesson. We quickly realized these women have never been read to themselves. And we know that most adults really enjoy being read to.

The women love our story time. which is so beautiful. So that's part of the learning, too, through the interaction between the moms and their kids. That's different than what they normally have at home. And then we do have a concentrated 30-minute ESL lesson. It's very driven by the women's interests and goals. Some want to learn professional tailoring. Some of them want to get their food handler's license. They're really wanting to figure out ways to make some income. So, when we know what they want, that helps us build a curriculum that is meaningful to them.

Honestly, they would probably come just to see each other, anyway, right? And in South Bend you have to have a car really to get anywhere. It's not a walking town. Transportation is not readily available and they do not all live close to each other. A lot of them had never met each other, even though they have similar stories of how they arrived here. There are 2 or 3 different languages spoken among the Afghan women, so they really are motivated to learn English so they can communicate with each other.

If you could wave a magic wand, what would you wish for refugees?

For Afghans, because Congress can't figure out how to pass legislation, they are just giving Afghans temporary two-year humanitarian parole status. Afghan refugees must file for this again while they are waiting for their asylum cases to be heard. And all those cases are pending. The system is impossible to navigate even for a native English speaker, even someone who has several degrees. The process is very expensive, and it is not intuitive. If this complexity were not part of their daily stress, it would really be a game changer for the ways they interact with our community. They could just live their lives in a little more peace.

To learn more about Neighbor to Neighbor, please visit <https://n2nsb.com/>

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Susan R. Adams, PhD., is Faculty Director of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and Associate Professor for the College of Education, Butler University. A former ESL teacher and instructional coach, her work is featured in such publications as *Theory into Practice*, *English Journal*, *The New Educator*, and the *Currere Exchange Journal*.

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Ms. Andrea Cramer is founder and executive director of Neighbor to Neighbor in South Bend, Indiana. With a background in teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL), she has lived and worked in Illinois, Indiana, Texas, and Michigan, where she taught English as a new language (ENL) at Malcolm X College, McLennan Community College, and in public schools. Having experienced the gift of welcome across the country, Andrea is passionate about passing on that gift of welcome in South Bend, where she lives with her husband, David, and their two children.

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