

One Teacher's Journey: Q&A with Adult ESL Educator, Barbara Al-Sabek  
By Doug Norris

*Barbara Al-Sabek's journey from a Rhode Island classroom to the world and back again is a story of curiosity, passion and service. As the Lead Learning Facilitator at the Genesis Center in Providence, Barbara has seen firsthand how education builds bridges to the realization of dreams for immigrants to the Ocean State. For the past two decades, she has also taught adult ESL in college classrooms throughout Rhode Island, and she continues to instruct adults enrolled in the Intensive ESL Program at Rhode Island College. She received an M.Ed. in TESL from RIC in 1994 and earned a B.A. in History and Political Science, also from RIC, in 1988. In June, she will retire from the Genesis Center after nine years of service (although she will keep teaching at RIC). Barbara credits her family and Rhode Island upbringing for her appreciation of world cultures and determination to work for social justice. We talked about her life and her love for teaching adult ESL earlier this Spring at the Genesis Center, over cups of sweet beans prepared by one of her students there.*

Where were you born and where did you grow up?

I was born in Fall River, Massachusetts, and I spent most of my childhood in West Warwick, Rhode Island and the remaining teen years in Barrington, Rhode Island. So I am a product of the West Warwick and Barrington school systems, although I went to Catholic Elementary School.

Where did you go to Catholic Elementary School?

St. James School on St. Mary's Street in West Warwick. West Warwick in those days was quite different from what it is today. There were no Rhode Island or Warwick malls. The center of commerce in this state was the middle of the state – Arctic, which was closed off every Friday night to vehicles for pedestrian traffic only. Sears was there, Cherry & Webb. This was where you went shopping and it was very lively and exciting. When the malls were built in 1970, it killed it almost immediately and West Warwick never recovered. They had quite a few factory jobs but there were also professional jobs, a lot of insurance agencies. Now it's very sad what's happened to it because they never were able to rebuild the lost manufacturing and retail jobs.

Tell me more about those Friday nights. What did people do?

They browsed. They shopped. They communicated. It was very social. There were – always in West Warwick – ethnic enclaves. There was the Portuguese section in Clyde, where they had a wonderful Labor Day festival. There was the Italian section down towards the lower end of Providence Street. They had their Sacred Heart Parish. There was the Polish section in Crompton. I lived in the Irish section. St. James Church – even though my dad was Italian-American, my mother and father were involved in the Irish church because we lived in the Irish section. So there were these strong ethnic neighborhoods but ironically at the time that I grew up there was only one African-

American family in the whole town and they happened to live in the house right next to us. There were five children in my family and there were four children in the Davis family, and so, naturally, we were inseparable. And so the first friends that I had were African-American. It was a military family. The dad was in the Army and he was always getting sent overseas, and the mom remained here. But I realized years later that that opportunity to have naturally acquired African-American friends as my first friends was one of the most impactful situations in my life. I'm going to tell you a story, you're not going to believe this, but I can remember in 1959 at Tiogue Lake in Coventry, Rhode Island, my mom, packing her five kids and the Davis kids into the station wagon, and going down for the day at the beach. That day my mother got into a big fight with a woman and a big fight, not a fistfight, but an argument, with a lifeguard. For years, I didn't understand what happened, and years later I asked my mother, "Ma," – she was a union organizer, so she was tough – "what was going on that day?" Here's somebody who grew up in Fall River. You couldn't get anything by her. "What happened that day when you were in that argument at the beach?" And she told me it was because some woman didn't want the Davis kids in the same water as her kids, and the lifeguard backed [the other woman] up. Now, this is 1959 Rhode Island, not 1959 Mississippi. So we had those mentalities here.

Just backing up a bit, how long were you in Fall River?

I was 2-years-old when we left Fall River. I have no memories. But my mom, she cooked all the Portuguese dishes, because she grew up there. And my mom is a descendant of Roger Williams – a direct descendant of his daughter, Mary. So she came from a WASP family that had basically fallen on hard times. So she was a Baptist, and when she married my father, who was a second-generation Italian-American, it was a big thing in the family. That was a big thing, that somebody from her family married a second-generation Italian-American from Barrington.

Then you moved to West Warwick. You lived there for how long?

Until I was 16, and then my family moved to Barrington. Now, when you hear Barrington, you think it's all affluent. But my father had grown up on Waseca Avenue, which is near Maple Avenue, which is the community of the Italian immigrants. My grandfather worked in the brickyards on Anoka Street. My aunt is still there. She's 99 years old. So there's still a few of the old-timers left, but it has changed.

What do remember about going to school at that time in Barrington?

Well, the Barrington school system was very liberal compared to what we had in West Warwick. I remember my electives were journalism and economics, and those were classes that weren't offered at West Warwick. So you could see the affluence of the community compared to what I had known previously.

What about its level of diversity?

There was no diversity. There was zero diversity. And the largest ethnic group in the area was the Portuguese. There were Portuguese-American, second- or third- or even fourth-generation kids in the Barrington school system, a lot of them, but there was no connection to what their home life was like or their culture. There were no Portuguese festivals that we knew of, whereas in West Warwick, you knew what the Portuguese-American community was doing because you knew about the festivals, you knew about the food, and you knew about the Azores, and you knew about the ports of fishing, and you knew about their life. But in Barrington all those Portuguese-American kids of whatever generation, there was no sharing of their culture. It was almost as if they had become so Anglicized that either they weren't living their native culture anymore or they just didn't feel comfortable sharing it because nobody cared.

Did you consider your experience growing up in Rhode Island a unique one?

My real experience was impacted by my parents. My mom was a union organizer. My dad was a very progressive man and a reader. Even though he was a construction worker, he was a reader. I came from a family that was the opposite of bourgeois. They were, for that time, radical. But they weren't professional radical. They were working-class radical. So that was very, very different, I think. They gave me my outlook on life. I have a working-class mentality. I really have that, but I also enjoy my work so much that I have the luxury of loving what I do, which the working class back then really didn't necessarily have. I mean, life is work. But I like my life. It's rewarding work.

What did you do after high school?

I moved to Boston. For about 10 years, I managed to support myself in grass roots organizations, and I was one of the founding members of the Gay Community News. I was the office manager. The community in Boston at that time was absolutely incredible. There were the anti-war activists, the women's liberationists, the Black Panthers, the gay activists - Stonewall had just happened - everything you can imagine. I was involved in all of those activities, communities, labor unions. At the time, you could get subsistent living from working in those organizations, building them up, because this was after the time that, early 1970s, there were community block grants for different organizations. Later they started de-funding things that were too radical, but at that time it was fantastic.

So once again you had a very multicultural experience...

I had been accepted into Boston University, which was one of the major reasons I went to Boston. I only lasted a semester. I was an avid reader. I wanted to read Sartre and Camus, but I didn't want to go to college classes. I wasn't ready for college yet. I wanted to change the world and I didn't see how I was going to do it sitting in a college classroom.

What was your degree going to be in?

Journalism. I was in the School of Public Communications.

What else do you remember from your Boston experience?

It began to get increasingly depressing as we started to move toward the Reagan years. A lot of the radicals who were really from upper middleclass families, they ended up working on Wall Street.

“The Big Chill” thing...

Yeah. It was “The Big Chill.” And for those of us who were really, this is our life because this is who we were, we felt betrayed. So early Reagan years I was still in Boston, and I was involved then with the Socialists Workers Party. And later I got involved with the Communist Party for a very short time. They sent me to Russia in 1985, to something called the 12<sup>th</sup> annual Festival of Youth and Students, which was a fantastic experience, because it was one of my first times outside the country. I remained with my radical politics all my life, but I also started to understand the necessity of working from within, and that’s what happens, I think, to lots of people. You know, I really wanted to join The Weather Underground when I went to Boston but by the time I was 30, I no longer felt that way.

I just want to pick up on something you mentioned. Russia was one of your first times out of the country. What was your first time?

The first was with Venceremos Brigade when I was 16. Venceremos Brigade sends people to Cuba. We picked sugarcane in Cuba for two weeks during the summer. They’ve been doing this since the time of the revolution. People still do it. At that time, when everybody had “Che,” on their shirt, and everybody who was leftist was so excited about the revolution, to go to Cuba and help the revolution was the most exciting thing.

What was your impression of those two weeks?

I realized that we saw what they wanted us to see. Even at that age, I could figure that out. We saw what they wanted us to see. But the people of Cuba are the most fun-loving, unrepressed, generous people I have ever known. There’s nothing quite like those Cubans that stayed in Cuba. At that time, and I think even now, because in 1985 when I was in Russia, I saw a Cuban delegation, and that same feeling was there. So what we get about Cuba are the emigres to Miami, who are, like, the exact opposite. But in Cuba, some people were instilled with revolutionary fervor to such a degree, and their natural cultural expectations from everyday enjoyment of living, merged into this wonderful human being that you really felt was going to be the future of the world.

So was Russia the second time you traveled outside of America?

Yes. I mean, I had been to Canada, but yes. I was in Russia for two weeks.

What was the purpose of the trip?

This was a festival of progressive youth, although by the time I went I was in my early 30s by then. They considered youth to be older than we do, I guess. There were delegations from I don't know how many different countries, and Gorbachev, of course, I remember when we were in Moscow, this was before glasnost, but it was just the beginning of everything opening up. An amazing thing happened when we were there. They put a ban on vodka for some reason so [laughs]...but you know what I experienced there? This is where I realized the failure of Stalinism. Because I saw, with my own two eyes, how cowed people were. And I saw, I mean, of course, you knew the KGB was following you, you were an American. But people would come to me and say things like, "Could you please sing to me all the Led Zeppelin songs you know?" They wanted to know about American culture so badly, but in such a subterranean way. And I saw, again, that the streets where the people shopped were empty. And I saw where they had us shop, the kiosks, were filled with all kinds of merchandise. And you could see the paranoia in the population, whereas compared to Cuba it was total exuberance. This is when I said, "Wait a minute. I might be a leftist, but what they've done in this country is wrong. Because these people have no freedom and they're living in fear." I met Gorbachev. We were introduced to Gorbachev. We got to shake his hand and everything, but you could tell that what the Communist Party had led us to believe about Stalinism was absolutely bogus.

So what did you do when you came back to the States?

I turned in my Communist Party card. We literally had a card with stamps on it with our dues per month. I said, "I don't care how betrayed you feel by this. I know that socialism is the answer, but this is not socialism. This is state-ism. This is the state controlling everything. That is not what I believe." I was always more of a Trotsky-ite anyway [laughs]. And then I decided that I needed to go back to college and do something. I was very interested at that time in the Middle East. So I'm saying, I want to learn Arabic, I want to do something with my life that has to do with the Middle East. So I went to RIC and I got a full year's worth of credit in the CLEP tests and just bulled my way through three years with a double major in history and political science. And there was a professor there – he's still there, his name is David Thomas – in the history department, who tutored me in Arabic. I was interested in the Palestinian issue. I lived and breathed Palestine. In the summer of '87, I went to Israel – actually, I went there in '86 and '87 – and I was in the middle of the Intifada. I was in a little town called Beitsahour, which is a Christian village right outside Bethlehem, which was known as the center of the Intifada. I was living with a family. In those days, they actually closed down the city. You couldn't get out. There was no food to eat after a couple of weeks so what the younger people in the family did was they slid out on their bellies and they picked wild grasses and they made them into stew. But the young people were fighting back. I mean, the Intifada was something major, because it was the first time in 20 years of occupation. I got shot with a rubber bullet. That was in Jerusalem during a demonstration. I took home a box of rubber bullets to show people. You know it's rubber on the outside but inside it's a hard metal little slug, just coated.

Who shot you?

The Israelis. I was taking pictures, and they yelled, "Don't take pictures! Don't take pictures!" You know, with my little Instamatic. I was out there. I got shot with a rubber bullet like other people because that's how they dispersed the crowd, the demonstration. So I got shot in the chest with a rubber bullet. That was my badge of honor, boy, I lived off that for a long time.

You must have felt a long way from Arctic...

Definitely. [Laughs] A very long way.

How long were you in the Middle East?

So I spent two summers there, and developed a lot of friends and relationships. I was trying to improve my Arabic. I was looking for graduate school programs in history and I ended up getting a full teaching assistantship to Georgetown. But going into a Ph.D. program without being able to read Arabic, especially when other people had done master's work in Arabic, I knew I was going to be under the gun. So for my second year at Georgetown I had gotten a scholarship to go abroad to Damascus, Syria to study Arabic.

What happened in Damascus?

I ended up working, teaching English as a Second Language while I was in Syria, to make some extra money, including teaching conversation school English at the embassy. My real desire was not to teach history. It was to live and work in the Middle East. I saw that with a teaching degree, an M.Ed. in TESL, that I was going to be able to support myself living in the Middle East. That was what my goal was. So I began to rethink what I really wanted to do with my life. Did I really want to come back and finish the program at Georgetown and teach history to undergrads if I was lucky enough to get a job? Or did I want to work in the Middle East for Palestinian rights, work for an NGO [Non-governmental Organization], what did I really want to do? So I was rethinking that while I was living there, because what I really wanted was a life that had to do with living in the Middle East, rather than talking about the Middle East. Anyway, then I got married.

When you were in Syria?

Yeah. Then I was faced with, what am I going to do here in Syria?

Did your husband speak English?

My husband spoke less English at that time than I spoke Arabic. So we primarily were able to communicate in Arabic. My husband was the only son of an upper-middleclass family. When you have 10 boys, one can go to Germany, another can go to whatever country, but when there's only one son, the expectation is that they remain in that country and they take care of the family. His family was not happy that he married an American,

because they saw the writing on the wall that I wasn't going to stay there forever. I convinced my husband that the only way that I could have a good life in Syria, the only thing I could do, was teach English. The University of Damascus wasn't going to hire me to teach history. So let me go back to the United States and do a quickie degree, credentialed, so that I could get a good, quality job at one of the embassy schools or the university schools. And he said, "OK." He wasn't too happy about it, but we came back to the United States and I did the degree and then, you know what happened? He's an engineer. What do you think happened? He got a good job. He got an excellent job. And he became Westernized and acculturated so much, so fast that he no longer wanted to go back. Not to live forever. Because he was a superstar here.

So while you got your master's degree at RIC, he was working where?

He always managed to keep working in Rhode Island. He's done very well here.

You never went back?

Well, we went back to visit a few times, but we sponsored his sister. My sister-in-law, who is disabled, now lives with us. So this was a long process. You have to wait 10 years to get a sister over here. So finally she came in 2010. So now we have her here, and now I thank God that things worked out the way they did because all his family is dispersed in Syria. What happened in Syria was everybody had to get out. The other two sisters are engineers, too. They both married doctors. One doctor works for the World Health Organization in Cairo. She's been there for, like, 15 years. Another one, who had to flee the country, is now in Saudi Arabia with her husband. And my mother-in-law is in Saudi Arabia, too. So my husband's family has had to leave the country, like everybody else who can get out. They're basically refugees. Luckily, they have professional jobs where they were able to land on their feet. But the disabled girl, she would've been the one who wouldn't have had any kind of life at all.

You live where?

We live in North Providence. About 90 seconds from school [RIC].

So what was your plan after you got your degree?

Well, I was disgusted because I wanted to go back to Syria. So my husband would always say, "Look, I'm making X amount of money, let's work for two or three years, then we'll just go back to Syria and retire." Then two or three years would go by and he'd say, "Well, I don't really want to leave now. I have the football pool. I have my tennis league. I've got poker." He became so American, it's terrible. [Laughs] He adjusted to life here in a way that I never would've thought possible. But he was always a very outward-thinking person. When I met him, he was studying Italian. He just loves everything about Italy. He was studying Italian with a Catholic priest. When I first met him, I kind of didn't like him. I rented an apartment from his mother. I thought that he was just too cute,

a little too, I don't know, everything. But I guess it kind of worked out. We've been married for 25 years.

Since you weren't going back to Syria, what did you do?

When I was at RIC, I had another teaching assistantship. While I was there, Professor Willis Poole, who was the head of the ESL program. He was a great guy, because he really started that program and built it up from nothing. So I was in his class as a T.A. one semester and then I just fell into that job after I graduated. That's a part-time job. And I got a job at Roger Williams University immediately after graduating. I loved working there. Their program is now done by one of those English language schools, but at the time I was there, you were a regular faculty member. The kids were great. International students are a completely different breed. They drive up in their Porsches, you know, but they were lonely and away from home. We had a lot of Japanese, Koreans, Saudis. That was the population.

How long were you at Roger Williams?

I was there from 1994 to 2001. Teaching ESL. I also taught at New England Tech for several years in the afternoons. I taught at Bryant. So I was picking up college jobs, and loving what I was doing. The big change for me happened on February 14, 2005, when I walked in this door to substitute for a friend one day, and I just never walked out. Because this, I knew was going to be the end of my teaching career, the culmination. I didn't know how to teach ESL until I started teaching here. I was teaching post-secondary, people who had already made it, doing advanced grammar like conditional sentences and having deep discussions on political topics. To be handed a beginning literacy class? With students who were virtually beginners in speaking and listening? [That] was a whole new world for me. And I really pushed myself to come up to par. Here in this Genesis Center, we're involved with the lives of our students. This is what it comes down to. I couldn't go back overseas to live. I had to find the next best thing. This is it. This place is it.

So you came here on Valentine's Day of 2005?

Yup. And on Valentine's Day of this year, one of my students who just got citizenship, presented me with a beautiful gift. A guinea pig.

Named Cupid?

Cupido. I already have two girls. But he had to give me a boy, so now I had to get a separate habitat.

What have you learned since you've been working at the Genesis Center?

How seriously underfunded adult education is. We're just this little block, and we don't get the same financial support that K-12 gets from the federal government or the state or



municipalities. Of 200 million adults in this country, about 15 percent have not received a high school diploma or equivalent. This a huge number of people that cannot contribute to the modern workplace as we want them to. This is a critical mass of people that if that if we don't help them to become better educated and workforce-trained, the country as a whole is behind the eight ball. We can't afford to allow 15 percent of the population not to be able to contribute in the ways that business owners tell us they need to contribute.

How does the Genesis Center help?

We have wraparound support systems. We have social workers. We have financial counselors. I think this work is so important. I think if people understood how important this work is there would be more federal, state and local money as well as more donations. Maybe it's the stigma of serving immigrants. I don't know. Genesis Center takes every single level. Many agencies don't begin taking people until they're at intermediate level. That means that they can get them ready for workforce faster. That means they might have better outcomes than us. We take somebody who just arrived in the country yesterday and doesn't speak a word of English. We have an absolute beginner class. And we're basically the only ones in Rhode Island doing that other than Dorcas International, which has a class specifically for refugees. Our mission is to serve the community at every level. This work is so important because you can make a real difference in people's lives. Here, you can see lives really change. It's the immigrant dream. So many of our students, they come to us, they never get the chance to go to school, they may or may not have acquired grammatically correct English, they concentrate on educating their children, and then all of a sudden they're 40 or 50 years old, and they've got a little bit of time when they can go back to school and they come here and they say, "This is the time for me." Or we have very young people who know that they've got another 50 years in the workforce and they don't want to work in the back of that restaurant for the rest of their lives. So you've got people in these classrooms that have motivation. And, as a teacher, you get to know your students and their culture and their goals, their lifestyles, their opinions in a way that you never do in college. Genesis Center is also part of a consortium with Dorcas International, Progreso Latino, RIFLI, and the Diocese of Providence. We get funded by USCIS to run citizenship classes. We're in our second grant, and we're having enormous success by putting our students in English as well as citizenship. Because what prevents them from becoming citizens is not that they can't memorize 100 history questions. Every sixth-grader can do that. It's that they don't have the English proficiency to pass the interview. Right now I have a huge class of 35 people, two afternoons a week. I had 10 oaths last month.

As you look back on your time at The Genesis Center, what stands out?

Refugee stories are always incredible. When the student develops enough language proficiency and enough comfort with the teacher and they begin to confide in you about the conditions. Some of the older Cambodian students, who lived through Pol Pot... I remember I had a young woman, she was only in her early 30s, but she was a child during this time and she remembered being so hungry. The Khmer Rouge had taken all the children from their parents and brainwashed them that they were not allowed to eat

barely anything. But one time she and a little friend of hers had stolen a potato, and they were found out. The Khmer Rouge started shooting into the bushes where they were hiding. They shot her little friend to death. And she said that every night for many years she had nightmares and still occasionally she would wake up in a cold sweat, because she remembers huddling in that bush with that potato in her hand and her friend being shot. What people have suffered...and if people only understand what your average undocumented person has been through. I mean, coming over with the coyotes. I had a woman who came over with her mother in a wheelchair and had to push her mother over the low levels of the Rio. The wheelchair got stuck in the mud, and being shot at from both sides. The stories...the resilience of these people. This is what makes America great. That people with that kind of backbone struggle to better themselves. What makes us different from other countries? Our openness to immigrants has always refueled the energy of the country. I think immigration is our greatest gift, and that's why we've stayed powerful. How are we different from other countries? That's it. Not to appreciate the lifeblood, the energy of our immigrant populations, replenishing our society with that drive and desire, I don't get how people don't see what it does for this country.