

Letter to the Mayor
By Erinn Struss

To the Mayor's Office,

I volunteer tutor English as a Second Language and Civics with Refugee Transitions. I started in April of 2008 with Guo Ming Lei and Yue Ying Wu, a low-income Chinese couple from Guong Dong province. They have three children, Tina (4), Anya (2), and Denny (1).

Guo Ming works full-time (and a lot of overtime) as a machinist in South San Francisco. He is surrounded by other Cantonese speakers all day. When he started tutoring, his verbal skills were somewhat functional/very basic. For example, he did not understand the past tense or question words such as, "What, who, when, and where." His written skills were horrible. Today, ten months later, Guo Ming can speak much easier. He understands questions and the past tense, although he is not perfect at producing them himself. He is able to call me with questions or cancel class. During tutorials we can talk about abstract ideas. In terms of workforce readiness, Guo Ming and I have worked on filling out job applications, interview skills, typical interview questions, and job vocabulary. We have also studied job seeking skills and how to look up wanted ads online. I really pushed Guo Ming to meet with Grace Lau, with Refugee Transitions, about different job training programs for himself and Yue Ying. I know he met with her, and I know the result. Since April, Guo Ming has gotten a raise and is now being trained a higher set of skills at work.

When we started, Yue Ying was with the kids all day. She only interacted with her parents, other family members, and people in Chinatown. She had almost no English verbal or listening skills, but could read and write very simple English in the present tense. In the last several months Yue Ying has gotten a lot more confident speaking English and, from my perspective, she is a lot more confident as a person. Yue Ying is very good at reading and writing, although she still has problems with verbs. Her pronunciation is getting better and we can now actually talk instead of just smiling at each other. Like with Guo Ming, we have studied job applications, job seeking, and interview skills. She retains this vocabulary but is currently still more interested in topics concerning health, education, and kids. I think her focus will shift as all the kids enter school/daycare in a year or two. The two oldest kids currently attend publicly funded daycare; in exchange Yue Ying is taking ESL classes with City College.

Yue Ying did not finish high school in China, but she is very intelligent and she studies a lot. In April of 2008, Yue Ying was not thinking about working; she was set against the idea. Now she is contemplating a job as a cashier. This is a huge leap from the farm where she was born and the sweat shops where she sewed clothes and made jewelry in Guong Dong before moving here.

I have tutored both Guo Ming and Yue Ying on health vocabulary, such as how to respond to questions asked by a doctor and how to describe symptoms. We have studied American Culture, History, and Civics, such as Chinese American History, the Civil Rights Movement and Martin Luther King, voting rights and the process of voting, and the differences in the American political parties. They now know the meaning of "citizen," "law," "immigrant," "tourist," "legal," "illegal," and "resident." We have also

worked on filling out forms, banking skills, balancing a check book, keeping track of credit card bills, and I occasionally assist them in filling out forms.

Guo Ming and Yue Ying have really progressed in the last ten months of ESL and civics instruction. They are wonderful students, individuals, and parents. Through them I have gained a lot more respect for Chinese culture, which I did not previously know that much about. I started tutoring with Refugee Transitions to try to get some experience teaching ESL in the US. I have a Masters degree and I taught for two years in Spain, but I have been unable to get an ESL job in the Bay Area. Tutoring Guo Ming and Yue Ying has made me realize this is really something I love. As a result I applied to San Francisco State University and next year I will be studying for an MA in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages). Everyone involved has learned and gained a lot from the experience. Without Refugee Transitions, these opportunities would not have been possible.

Sincerely,

Erinn Struss
Refugee Transitions Volunteer