

## **Gupta turns from tutor to student in English conversation class at Elmhurst Library**

*By Divya Gupta  
December 13, 2007*

Sometimes it takes stepping into someone else's shoes for a day to either appreciate your own life, or theirs or both. And sometimes, it takes an English conversation class at the Elmhurst library to enjoy the simple pleasures of life and bring you back to the basics.

On a recent Wednesday, I managed to do both when I visited the Adult Learning Center located in the basement of the Elmhurst library in Queens.

"We churn out English educated, civic-minded individuals and equip them with survival skills and the ability to cope with life outside," said Bona Soanes, who has been working at the center for 22 years and now manages the center.

The Adult Learning Center offers adult literacy courses such as English for Speakers of Other Languages and the Pre-General Education Development, a high school equivalency exam required to be eligible for many jobs and to go to college.

In addition the center offers a wide variety of courses aimed at providing knowledge of daily life skills and development of the person. These include reading newspapers, music appreciation, storytelling and games, audio reading groups, poetry, craft and talk and nutrition.

I was just in time for an English conversation class on nutrition taught by Vicky Tao, a journalist-turned-community educator from Taiwan, who moved to the United States in 2001.

A Colombian student, Bertha Cardona, was sharing what she made for Thanksgiving with the class. She said she had marinated a turkey in sesame seeds, garlic and red wine for two days.

"The turkey must have been very drunk by the end of it," I said and the class went into peels of laughter.

Tao introduced me as 'a new friend' and I felt immediately at ease. It was the sixth session in an eight-week course on nutritional health information and food safety and security.

Tao pulled out a small plastic box full of plastic bags with different lentil samples such as fava beans, green split beans, whole yellow peas and soy beans. She was going to talk about sources of protein.



Immigrants of all ages attend English conversation class at the Adult Learning Center in the Elmhurst Library

**Photo:** Divya Gupta

The class got excited and everyone started talking at the same time, asking Tao and me about the bean samples.

As Tao and I started explaining what each item was, Gabriel Vanela, a Columbian male student, inquired why there were dried pieces of garlic in some of the lentil packets. An Indian lady, Vasanth Mallan, who is also taking the class, responded.

"It keeps away the bacteria," she said in a heavy South Indian accent. "We learned in last class."

Vanela had asked a common sense question which one can easily assume knowledge of but it got me thinking.

"I think the difference is that bacteria grows bigger on it's own by feeding of the environment." I said. "Germs do not grow."

I was only partially correct. Bacteria are in fact a type of germ. Other types of germs include viruses, fungi and protozoa.

"What's the difference between beans and peas?" and similar simple but common-sense questions punctuated the rest of the class. I found myself learning as much as the students.

Michelle Brown Johnston, who co-manages the center, was teaching another conversation class and she told a story about the history of Thanksgiving and then quizzed the class.

It was the simplest version of the story I had heard to date and finally the history was clear.

As I helped students answer the questions after later, it occurred to me that Johnston had gone through some pains to simplify the story. She had to get in the minds of the students and prepare material and visuals that would help them to understand the story in the simplest way.

Johnston, who has been working at the center since 2004, admits there are challenges in retaining students and finding progress over time.

"Survival comes first," said Johnston, explaining why retention is difficult. "Students find jobs and get busy with earning a living."

Nevertheless, there are plenty of successes and an ever-increasing demand for programs. Many of the center's programs are offered outside but they are either expensive or draw students who are at a level that is higher than what the library gets, added Soanes.

"We are the people that they come to when no one else will take them," she said.

The community service that people like Soanes spent a better part of their lives doing is rewarded with personal satisfaction, if not widespread social recognition.

"For me the proudest moment is not the finished product but the process by which something is created," said Soanes.

As for me, among other things, the day brought back home the importance of a much-neglected aspect of my life - basic health.