

EAs and CYWs- Couldn't Do It Without Them

We have been blessed with the support of EAs and CYWs in the ESL Department at WCI for some time now. In fact, I can't imagine how we ever did it without them. You see, English Language Learners are a unique kind of vulnerable group that bring all sorts of issues and exceptionalities with them. They are teenagers with all the challenges that Canadian kids have and they also suffer higher incidence of mental health issues because of loss and change, trauma and PTSD because of war, family separation, gap frustration, homesickness and alienation. At WCI, many are fee-paying VISA students with all the pressure that goes along with that, and they are here without family. In the last five years, the needs of newcomers has spiked.

Thank God for the EAs who play such a key role in the lives of the most vulnerable of this already vulnerable group. The EAs have the tough task of following the highest needs kids around for most of the day. While teachers may teach these challenging students for maybe one period a day, EAs often spend more time with them than their own parents or host families do! And they somehow do it with patience. On paper, EAs are hired to assist with the academic part of class by supporting the teacher and students with course work. How inadequate a description of their value and importance that notion is!

At WCI we have three dedicated EAs in our ESL department who have basically written their own job description - an unwritten manifesto which starts with helping from the heart. Each plays many roles on any given day. Often they act as the fierce mother bear, guiding firmly with tough love but ready to rip the face off of anyone who demeans their students. They are morale builders, clairvoyants, they build hope about uncertain futures. Sometimes confidantes they listen to heartbreak and in the listening bolster students enough to keep going. They are post-secondary consultants, behaviour modification experts, queens of second chances and, above all, builders of people.

In our large and fragmented department which comprises more than 20 teachers each with a section or two, our three EAs are often the best source of insight and counsel when teachers try to make sense of a student's behaviour, or level of performance. These ladies provide cohesion to our department. They help us troubleshoot as they see students in more than one class with different teachers and they see kids in ways that teachers do not or cannot. This makes our EAs integral.

Janine Bender has been at WCI for over 8 years now. No one I know commits to her role as she does. Janine came to us from an award-winning EA team in an Ottawa board - how lucky are we. Janine makes it her business to know all - and I mean all - that is going on at the school both about extra-curricular activities for students so she can connect them and about all things staff-related so she can support the teachers in the department. She works far beyond her allotted hours, for example, voluntarily handling our data base for extra time accommodations for ELLs during exam time. A mammoth job she has taken on because, with her sharp office management skills, frankly she can do it better than any of us. She has improved a system that we now share with other schools and she runs ELL exams during the exam period. Janine comes in early to help with Nutrition for Learning, she shares her elite volleyball skills by serving as the head coach of our junior girls' volleyball team and she often helps with our touring refugee

group called Crossing Borders. Many a lunch hour she can be found offering math help to prep students for their tests. And it is her intuition and experience that has helped us better place students in course levels, identify students who need Special Education support or intervene before a mental health issue gets too big. Simply put, many kids would likely not have made it to graduation or become the young men and women they are today without her contributions both large and small, subtle and not so.

A year ago, because of exploding numbers, we were lucky to acquire another seasoned full-time EA, Wendy Shantz, from Forest Heights. Our gain is their deeply felt loss. She is another all-in EA who loves her students and finds ways to connect in ways that shine a light on them. Whether by sharing hard rock titles, running reading groups at lunch, or bringing in her jewellery-making kit to connect with outliers, she finds ways to ensure that no student feels invisible. Wendy has quickly fit in here at WCI and provides seasoned advice about how to do things better or more efficiently. Wendy is a natural connector who shares teaching techniques that work between teachers and is often at the centre of lively conversations among groups of students at lunch or after school. She has a keen eye for changes in students that others might miss and is quick to employ proactive solutions to student difficulties.

Abigail Kirkland is a versatile EA who works a few hours with ELLs and many hours in Special Education. This overlap is brilliant for our students as she makes it safe and attractive for them to seek help in Special Education - she is the trusted and familiar face that increases the likelihood a student will take the step to get the help they need. Abi specializes in working with the beginner, timid students who are just getting used to high school and Canada. She is patient, gentle and kind as she helps in the ESL GLS course. Also the mama bear she keeps teachers aware of when kids are drowning or ready to blow and she is a fierce advocate for them.

At WCI we are also lucky to have two CYWs whose workload has increased exponentially in the last five years as students present complex mental health and other concerns. Chris Gerrie has been a tremendous support to our deeply troubled and sometimes damaged newcomer students who suffer from PTSD, complex mental health issues, anxiety, abuse, homesickness, chronic absenteeism and more. Having worked with Chris in Student Success for a couple of years, I can report how obvious it was to students if she was not there. I don't even want to think about how some students would have managed without her gentle, constant and wise support. I don't know how Chris physically and emotionally listens all day to the tragic stories of youth and can still be upbeat and well herself. I have worked with Chris on just a handful of trying cases and am in awe of how well she does her job, how above and beyond she is willing to go for kids and how much of a difference she makes in our building. Trish Summerfield is a part-time CYW at our school who reaches kids whom others would be more likely to avoid. Her relatability draws youth to her and her no-nonsense awareness of their struggles make her able to meet students where they are at. She is cool in a crisis and operates as a solid team player to support our troubled youth.

I have learned a lot from all these fine women and am proud to call them friends. Teaching 'outsiders' in the ESL department means that equity is of paramount concern to us. Speaking of equity, it has become clear to me over the years that EAs are often

undervalued in this Board. I'm sad to say I have heard, on some occasions, teachers imply that they are 'just EAs' and I have witnessed too many times where EAs are left out of either school or Board communications whether for PD or staff endeavours, training or simply information loops. Even things like getting EAs Chromebooks so they can do their job is an issue. Obviously these oversights and exclusions big or small 'smart.' It hurts these selfless and essential staff members who deserve more. It is my hope that our Board will be more intentional in how it treats EAs and other 'support staff.' In my room, for one, they are equal and integral teaching partners. A thousand thank yous to all EAs and CYWs for all they do for some of our most, at-risk kids.

Lynn Schulze
Department Head of ESL at Waterloo C.I.

[Here are a few student testimonials about these fine individuals:](#)

From KM - Grade 12

Ms. Gerrie is a CYW at my school who went out of her way to introduce herself to me when I was in grade 9. She must have found out I was struggling - perhaps from my grade 8 CYW who gave her a heads up. She goes out of her way to do this with everyone to let them know that there is someone they could talk to.

In grade 9, boy was I struggling. Initially, she didn't know how bad things were for me. At that time I was a messed up and a terrible person. I was addicted to drugs with all the problems that go with that and I was sometimes mean to others.

Along the way, Ms. Gerrie and Ms. Summerfield continued to reach out to me in small ways. They would check in and ask me how I was doing. What's going on. That kind of thing. The fact that they had seen me at my worst made it easier to move forward with them. I came to trust them.

Soon I felt it was safe to approach them. Whenever I was having a mental breakdown, I would burst into Ms. Gerrie's room and talk it out with her. Likely I was also belligerent, but she looked through that. Ms. Gerrie was there from the beginning, Ms. Summerfield joined my support team later. They helped me with day to day things like buying food, getting a health card and getting a student card. They helped me get online and make a resume. Ms. Gerrie listens with understanding and does not make you feel out of place or stupid. Ms. Summerfield seemed to understand the really rough stuff I was into. They complimented each other as they rallied to help me.

Ms. Gerrie and Ms. Summerfield are the ladies who helped me get my shit together. To be honest, without them, I don't know where I'd be. I'm not sure I would even be here. Ms. Gerrie helped me realize that my situation and the lifestyle I was in, was not normal. It was all I knew, but she helped me realize it wasn't normal or healthy and that pushed me to change my actions to create a new normal. Which included coming clean and sorting out relationships with my dad, getting my credits and more.

They helped me realize my self-worth. They helped me realize that I deserved better than what I was giving myself.

Today, I'm clean, I'm finishing school, I live in a healthy environment with my father and I have a part-time job at Zehr's. I have them to thank for pushing me to do all the things that were hard for me but made me into who I am today. I am not the girl I was in grade 9. Now I'm going to make it and I couldn't have done it without Ms. Gerrie and Ms. Summerfield. And I'm only one of the many students they do this for.

From Albert

I still remember my first day at WCI. Literally a completely new environment to me. To be honest I was kind of nervous and still in a sad mood because I missed my friends back in China so much. But the appearance of Mrs. Bender and Mrs. Shantz soon helped me walk out of all this. They're so kind and approachable! Now I feel just like home!

I haven't forgot Mrs Shantz's patience and carefulness when she was editing my composition, her busy preparation and efforts for the ESL dinner, and her enthusiasm for all students, which touches me the most.

I'm always grateful every time I meet Mrs. Bender's encouraging eyes. They not only give me courage but also power. Mrs. Bender made my every day! Words are powerless to express my gratitude!

We ought to be thankful all the time. It's not only good manners, but the right thing to do.

From Ahmad

Ms. Bender,

Thank you very much for all your help. You are very kind and generous with your time and willingness to help in class and during your lunch. I want you to know that I appreciate your help very much. Sincerely, Ahmad Almahmoud.

From Asal

Dear Mrs.Shantz,

I'm very grateful for your help and your assistance through these eight months. Every time that I have any problem in my academics, you are the one that helps me and give me feedback. For instance, although you had lots of work to do and you haven't eaten

your lunch, you helped me so much in my English assignment and gave me feedback. I'm so thankful for your help and I hope I can make you proud.

From Ms. Kirkland's GLS Class

Dear Ms. K.:

I like you help us and you doing very will with us thank you for help me and help another student you so tired with us I hope you happy in your life. Ayat.

Thank you so for your attention and co-operation made us in english class thank you for help us to be a good student. Ghadeer.

I am grateful for the gratitude that I have received in these months to study, do work and help me. Thank you, fondly, Israel.

Thank you for your help. YOu help me review before test. You help me work BTT. Shuai.

My first day in class was very nice and tender. Thanks for helping us. I hope you are happy every day.

Thank you for helping me to learn English.

Thanks for helping us. And being powerful for us to helps us learn english and get good education. I hop you have a blessing year with us. I hop you enjoed teaching us and listening to us. I will say thanks from my hart for every thing the you did to us. Omar.

Thak you you teach m a lot of English. Thak you for you helped me when I need help. Thak for you teach a lot of thing. Nice to meet you. Mary.

Thank you for help us for our work, you are very helpful and nicely teacher and you help me very much! Thank you for help. I hop you help more studens and keep doing that. You a good teacher. Thank you, Jia yi.

Thank you for your help and support for me. You helped me a lot with my English and Geography. Mohammad.

From Cissy

To Ms. Bender, Thank you so much for your help, when I have any problems or difficulties, you will give up the rest time to help us. You are a good teacher. I was lucky to meet you in my high school.

From Adnan

Mrs. Bender, You've been always one of my best teachers in the school and outside of school with Crossing Borders, It's really hard sometime to thank a person that helped you a lot, so I'm really sorry Mrs. Bender because I actually can't thank you enough for encouraging and helping me to get my language improved, for your smiles in the halls because that made me feel so welcomed and friendly, and for letting me and helping me make lots of friends. I really can't forget English ESL COI because you and Ms. Schulze made the whole class just amazing and unforgettable. And also I would like to thank you on behalf of all my friends (and you know how many friends I have) because you didn't just help me, you help anyone in the school and really helping is not an easy word especially when YOU help a whole department.

I really appreciate everything you did for me and for my friends and I will never forget you Mrs. Bender :)

Thank you!

From Andrew

Dear Mrs. Gerrie,

Thank you so much for everything you have done for me over the past year and a bit. It has been such a pleasure talking and meeting you, you are an incredibly nice person and I always enjoy talking to you. Last year I don't think it is a secret that I wasn't at my best, and you helped me raise my self esteem immensely and just in general talking to you was always a highlight of my day whenever I was at my lowest. You really did help me progress that year and I really appreciated how you were willing to talk to me whenever I needed it (even though it is kinda your job, that isn't the point). I am so thankful that you have been there for me throughout my high school career, and I look forward to spending more time with you.