



# NEWSLETTER

Fall 2023 Issue

*Vision: To be a transformational English language and literacy program, leading the way for residents of the greater PWC area.*

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### *A Message From the BEACON Executive Director*

## Immigrants with Limited Language Skills Face Challenges

Over the past month, I've encountered several situations that have opened my eyes to the challenges faced by immigrants with limited language skills. These moments have brought me face to face with their struggles in a profound way.

The first incident unfolded in a mechanic's shop, where I was addressing a car issue. A young man entered, his hopeful inquiry, "Hablan Español?" met with disappointment as the staff replied in English. His defeated expression tugged at my heartstrings. It turned out he needed an emissions inspection, a straightforward task for most. I stepped in to assist, introducing him to the wonders of Google Translate as we completed the required form. He expressed his



**Jennifer Katac**

desire to learn English, and I shared information about BEACON's ESOL classes. Sadly, he was not yet 18 and couldn't join our program yet. Nevertheless, I provided him with alternative resources for learning English. He promised to share our program information with his friends and family. I left my contact number with the mechanic, assuring them they could reach out if they needed language assistance during his check-out.

The second encounter took place at a pharmacy as I was finalizing my purchase. A gentleman approached the cashier, speaking in Spanish, inquiring about a specific medication. The cashier repeatedly directed him to "aisle 10 on the end," but the man remained perplexed. I couldn't bear to see him struggle, so I stepped in and said, "pasillo 10 al final." His face immediately brightened, and I repeated the phrase once more. With a smile of gratitude, he headed toward aisle 10 to find what he needed.

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## MISSION:

Inspired by the Benedictine love of learning, BEACON empowers its adult learners to enhance their quality of life by:

- Addressing their changing needs through English language classes, citizenship classes, employment and life skills training, and literacy education.
- Leveraging well-trained volunteers, technology, partnerships, and alliances to provide an opportunity for local residents to give back to the community.
- Bringing people together from all walks of life through stewardship, service, and hospitality to achieve BEACON's vision.

## VISION:

To be a transformational English language and literacy program, leading the way for residents of the greater PWC area.







**BEACON and Grace United Methodist Church volunteers at the Annual Literacy Training with BEACON staff. (Right) Cynthia Hatch, Associate Director of Business, ESL, and TESOL Programs at NOVA. Photos by Jim Connal.**

## *Annual Literacy Training Features Engaging Presentations*

On June 28, 2023, BEACON hosted its Annual Literacy Training event at Grace United Methodist Church in Manassas, Virginia.

The day featured a range of engaging presentations, including "Teaching Pronunciation" by Cynthia Hatch, Associate Director of Business, ESL, and TESOL Programs at NOVA Community College, and "Immigration 101: An Introduction to Immigration Law Basics" by Stacy Jones, Program Director of Hogar Immigrant Services – Legal, Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Arlington, among various other insightful resource-sharing sessions presented by BEA-

CON staff and dedicated volunteers from both BEACON and Grace United Methodist Church.

The event drew 32 enthusiastic attendees, and we extend our heartfelt gratitude to all those who organized, participated in, and generously hosted this invaluable training day. The participants departed the event equipped with a wealth of fresh ideas and valuable resources to enrich their interactions with students.



*BEACON for English Language & Literacy is a secular ministry of  
the Benedictine Sisters of Virginia*

# *Learning Circles Enable On-Demand English Education*

BEACON's Learning Circles program is a remarkable initiative offering adult learners in Prince William County an invaluable opportunity to kick-start their English learning journey. Launched during the Spring 2023 session, this program welcomed 59 eager learners who, due to enrollment timing or capacity constraints, couldn't join BEACON's standard classes. These learners chose to commit to learning and practicing English at their own pace, harnessing the power of the award-winning Learning Upgrade app or website.

In addition to self-paced learning, participants in the Learning Circles dedicated themselves to weekly online meetings on Tuesday evenings for a duration of eight weeks to practice English conversation with their peers. The program's intent is to curtail waiting times for adult learners and get them learning sooner. For the Fall session, BEACON streamlined the process by introducing in-person registration for Learning Circles. This enabled staff to gauge each student's English proficiency, assist them in downloading the Learning Upgrade app, and troubleshoot any issues.

Learning Circles embody the concept that every member has something to offer and gain from the group in an adaptable, peer-guided

learning environment. The weekly online meetings organized by BEACON are facilitated by fluent English speakers. In the Spring 2023 Learning Circles, students collectively amassed an impressive 1,650 hours of learning using the Learning Upgrade app, encompassing a remarkable 6,878 lessons.

***"The Learning Circle doesn't follow a set curriculum, allowing participants to steer conversations and determine topics."***

At the conclusion of the 8-week Spring session, participants were surveyed about their Learning Circles experience. Respondents overwhelmingly praised the opportunity to practice English with fellow students and their facilitator during the weekly online meetings. They also appreciated the flexibility of using the Learning Upgrade app on their phones or computers for learning. The convenient timing of the online meetings, as well as the enjoyable and user-friendly nature of the Learning Upgrade app, were additional highlights (*see examples on next page*).

All respondents confirmed that they used the Learning Upgrade

app independently between the weekly online Learning Circle sessions and expressed their eagerness to recommend BEACON's Learning Circles program to others.

Sara Overby, a volunteer facilitator for the Spring 2023 Advanced Level Learning Circle, shared her insights: *"The Learning Circle doesn't follow a set curriculum, allowing participants to steer conversations and determine topics.*

*These circles enable participants to foster a sense of community within their group, helping them realize that others face the same challenges in learning English and adapting to a new country. Over the weeks, students became increasingly invested in one another's progress and personal journeys."*

Griselda P. a student in the Spring 2023 Advanced Learning Circle shared: *"I liked participating in the Learning Circles. I thought that the volunteer facilitator was wonderful. I was easily able to navigate the Learning Upgrade App and completed many lessons in the app."*

BEACON's commitment to knowledge-sharing extends beyond its own community. Our staff have collaborated with the Virginia Adult Learning Resources Center (VALRC) to develop a Learning Circles toolkit. This toolkit serves as a



← Pronouns 2 Reflexive 0 0%

**You should get \_\_\_\_\_ a dog.**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**myself   yourself   himself   herself**


**itself   ourselves   yourselves   themselves**

**Select the missing reflexive pronoun**

← Illustration Visuals 2 0 0%

**The Boat Ride**

**Uncle Jim took Dave on a boat ride on the bay. On the way they passed some birds and sea lions. Dave waved out to the sea lions, who barked back! At 5 p.m. they headed back home.**



**What type of birds did they see?**

**hummingbirds**

**crows**

**ducks**

BEACON's Learning Circles students have access to the Learning Upgrade app on their phones or computers. Sample images (left) provide self-paced lessons allowing students to progress at their own speed. Weekly online check-ins with a trained facilitator are available.

valuable resource to enlighten other ESOL programs in the area, enabling them to implement Learning Circles successfully. The resource is frequently shared with community-based literacy organizations when VALRC distributes professional development opportunities via email and is also accessible on the VALRC website.

BEACON's Learning Circles program has been made possible through the generous support of grant funding from Crimsonbridge, Hilton Fund for Sisters, and Dollar General. Beyond the initial subscriptions required for Circle participants to access the Learning Upgrade app, BEACON has secured unlimited subscriptions, an unforeseen advantage. This enables expanded app access for students and teachers in our regular English and Citizenship classes. The Learn-

ing Upgrade app encompasses a diverse range of skills and topics that are invaluable to students, including workplace skills, financial literacy, digital literacy, math, reading comprehension, and GED preparation.

The Fall 2023 Learning Circles, which began mid-September, have an enrollment of 26 students. The smaller enrollment number is due to an establishment of a new class partner site, Manassas Baptist Church, which has significantly expanded our in-person class capacity. As a result, we now accommodate more students in both morning and evening classes. Planning and volunteer recruitment is already underway for the Winter Learning Circles, which will begin in early January 2024.

## Student Spotlight:

# *Griselda Petit Remains Constantly Curious*

**G**riselda Petit is an inspiring BEACON student who always has a smile on her face and brings joy to others. Griselda's journey is a testament to the transformative power of language learning and her experiences shed light on the impact of BEACON's programs.

Griselda came to the United States 43 years ago from Chiriquí, República de Panamá, wanting a better life for her children (now 37 and 40 years old). She understood the importance of learning English early on, having studied it in school before coming to the U.S. Today, the constantly curious woman picks up English everywhere she goes and uses every opportunity to practice it. "Even though I am at the retirement age, it is never too late to learn and improve my English," the 66-year-old said.

Griselda first learned about BEACON after seeing a flyer at work with the Benedictine Sisters of Virginia. She was pleasantly surprised to learn her employer sponsored the program. BEACON was started more than 31 years ago by Sister Eileen Heaps and continues today as a secular mission of the Sisters.

Griselda first enrolled in a 12-week English class with BEACON but did not reenroll in the next class session. When she reached out again, she missed the registration date. Soon after, she learned about and signed up for **Learning Circles** (see article on page 4). "I liked participating in the Learning Circles. I thought that the volunteer facilitator was wonderful. I was easily able to navigate the Learning Upgrade App and completed many lessons in the app," Griselda said.

Griselda is currently enrolled in the 2023 Fall session's Advanced Class and is also paired with one of our volunteers, Sister Patricia Anne, working one-on-one to improve her grammar and writing skills. She

aspires to become a novelist and plans to write about her journey to the United States and the experiences of immigrants striving to achieve their dreams. Griselda is also eager to explore poetry. Griselda shared: "I am improving my grammar and my speaking," she said. "I want my grammar and speaking to be perfect-improving and perfecting my English language skills will give me more confidence. My dream is to be confident in what I am writing."



Griselda Petit

In her younger years, Griselda shared that her parents spoke English at home, and she responded in Spanish. At the time, she reported that she didn't grasp the value of learning English, as she hadn't planned on leaving Panama. But, as Griselda poignantly states, "Life pushed me here."

Griselda's message to fellow learners is simple yet powerful: "If you learn English, you can go further in life, you can communicate, people can talk to you, and you can secure better jobs with better pay. People will also respect you more. But if you

are satisfied with having someone speak on your behalf you will always be dependent on others."

Her passion for learning has even led her to express interest in volunteering with BEACON, aiming to inspire others who, like her, began their journey here. Her success is poised to motivate and guide our other students.

Griselda also shared her gratitude for BEACON's supporters "I want to thank them for the opportunity that they are giving us and I want them to keep in mind that we are foreigners that want to go farther and to grow and we will take this opportunity and make the best of it. I am very appreciative of the opportunity to learn."

Griselda resides in Manassas Park with her 92-year-old mother, whom she takes care of with great devotion. When she's not engrossed in her English studies,

she finds joy in listening to Salsa music and dancing. She remains active in her community, driven by a passion for both learning and contributing to the world around her.

We eagerly await her first published book, and we hold no doubt that she will achieve remarkable suc-

cess in her endeavors. Griselda Petit's journey is a testament to the power of determination and lifelong learning, and we are excited to see her dreams come to fruition. Her story inspires us all!

## *Immigrants with Limited Language Skills Face Challenges continued*

*(Continued from page 1)*

The third situation unfolded in a seemingly endless line at the post office, where I was mailing a book to a student. A Korean-speaking woman sought assistance from the postal clerk but faced a language barrier. The clerk attempted to locate a colleague to help, but they were unavailable. Frustration mounted as the Korean lady struggled to convey her mailing needs amidst the growing impatience of everyone in line. She lacked the zip code for the address and couldn't specify her shipping preferences from the available options. Finally, she managed to reach a friend or family member by phone, who was painstakingly trying to translate her requests to the postal worker. As I completed my transaction and left the line, they were still working tirelessly to untangle the situation.

In these moments, I couldn't help but feel deeply empathetic for these individuals facing language barriers in our community. Learning another language, particularly English, presents a formidable challenge, but the urgency of this endeavor cannot be overstated. Proficiency in English not only fosters personal growth but also serves as a vital bridge to community integration.

Imagine the power of being able to express your needs and receiving immediate responses. Picture the distress of facing a medical emergency and not being able to convey your symptoms to first responders, who are there to offer critical assistance. Language, in these moments, emerges as the lifeline that binds us to the heart of our community. It empowers us to articulate our desires, extend help to those in need, share moments of laughter, forge connections with neighbors, volunteer our time, console a friend in distress, impart knowledge, embrace personal growth, and pursue our most cherished aspirations. The ability to communicate in a new language transcends the mundane—it's the key that unlocks the full spectrum of human experiences, allowing us to learn, evolve,

and ultimately, achieve our dreams.

There's an undeniable sense of fulfillment that we feel when we witness our students progress from a place of complete unfamiliarity with the English language to confidently introducing themselves and engaging in basic conversations. These interactions serve as an unending wellspring of inspiration for both myself and our dedicated staff and volunteers in the work we undertake.

Recently, I had the privilege of conversing with a student whose English proficiency had grown to the point where she could share a profoundly proud moment – her daughter's enrollment in the gifted program at high school. Her joy radiated through her words, and I couldn't help but share in her pride. Another student shared with me that he diligently practices his English lessons during his lunch break, his determination unwavering as he eagerly aspires to conquer every level BEACON has to offer.

These moments of triumph and determination are the very essence of what makes our mission meaningful. They deepen my appreciation for the unwavering commitment of our 140+ dedicated volunteers, our tireless staff, and the invaluable support of our community partners. Together, we create meaningful pathways for English learning and citizenship opportunities for our students.

Every day, I am also astounded by the unwavering resolve of our students, their relentless pursuit of language mastery, and their boundless dedication to achieving their personal aspirations and dreams. In their stories, I find endless motivation and reminders of the profound impact of our collective efforts.

I invite you to immerse yourself in the inspiring stories of our remarkable students, our dedicated community partners, our tireless staff, and our invaluable volunteers, all of whom collectively contribute to the extraordinary community that is BEACON.





## Volunteer Spotlight:

# Brenda Hedrick Opens Doors, Minds for ESOL Students

**A**s a university professor Brenda Hedrick opened her students' eyes to a new cultural world when she taught Italian. As a volunteer instructor, she helps open doors for BEACON students who face everyday challenges in a new language and a new world.

The experience has touched Brenda and given her a new appreciation for the determination of her students. "I am impressed by their positive attitudes, their strong dedication to learning English, their clever senses of humor, their kindness, their motivation, their resilience, their gratitude, how hard they work, and how smart they are," she said. "It is a gift to spend time with them."

Brenda was inspired to volunteer in part because her husband is an immigrant and many of her friends have been international students. "I have a deep appreciation for other cultures and understand the challenges of navigating day-to-day life in a country where you don't speak the language well," Brenda explains. Although she doesn't live in the area, she has still been able to teach online courses, which are a popular option for BEACON students who often find it difficult to attend in-person classes.

The online courses are a departure from the in-person classes Brenda is used to teaching, but she says she works to build connections among all the students, and credits BEACON's comprehensive training for guiding her in teaching students at various lev-

els and for practical online teaching advice.

"As students enter, we exchange personal greetings—even if someone enters late, and at the end of class, we exchange personal greetings," Brenda said of her teaching routine. "During class, I call on each student—there is no hiding in my course—and students interact a lot with each other, sharing how they personally relate to the material, whether it's details about their families, where they work, where they shop, their tips for saving money, what they like to do in their free time, etc. And we always enjoy a good laugh. Over time, strong connections develop."

Connecting with her students has given Brenda a window into the special challenges they face. "One of my students is a highly educated professional who had a successful career in his country of origin," she explained. "Given the different U.S. system and credentialing constraints, it is not possible for him to resume his career here—he would have to redo his professional education. As a result, he must reinvent himself."

"This is a deeply challenging endeavor on professional and personal levels, on top of orienting to a new country and language," Brenda said. "Many students also left parents and close-knit extended families behind, some without the hope of seeing them anytime soon. At the same time, some of my female students are learning to drive and their daughters are going to school."



# VOLUNTEERS NEEDED

Teach English, empower adult  
language learners to:

- ✓ Become more confident & competent
- ✓ Feel part of our community
- ✓ Be independent and advocate for themselves and their families



Their challenges may be daunting, but Brenda is aware that one volunteer teacher can make a difference in the everyday lives of BEACON students.

“Communication is at the crux of everything we do, so teaching them language skills will help open doors for them—from being able to form new personal and professional relationships, because they can communicate about themselves, who they are, and the skill sets they bring to the table, to receiving good medical care because they can communicate about

their and their families’ symptoms, to helping them share their new identities as Americans who carry with them their rich cultural heritage and customs from their countries of origin,” Brenda explains. “We also delve into critical life skills such as financial literacy to help them successfully manage these areas of their lives, and our class provides a warm, inclusive environment, so students understand that they are not alone in this challenging transition and that they are valued.”

# Empower Adult Learners Through Literacy - *Become a Volunteer Teacher!*

Join BEACON for English Language & Literacy in making a life-changing impact! Literacy transforms lives by providing adults with the essential skills they need for everyday tasks such as reading prescriptions, securing employment, assisting their children with homework, pursuing higher education, and even becoming U.S. citizens.

**Opportunity Description:** We are seeking dedicated volunteers to teach adult English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). No prior second language or teaching experience is required. As a volunteer, you'll receive free, professional-level training to equip you for this rewarding role.

## Key Details:

This is a professional-level volunteer opportunity.

Volunteers will teach once (or twice) a week, crafting their own lessons using materials provided by BEACON. We encourage creative lesson planning that goes beyond the book, incorporating additional practice, engaging conversations, and student involvement.

**Class Dates:** November 27, 2023 - February 29, 2024

## Class Days/Times:

Mondays and Wednesdays: 9:30 AM - 11:30 AM

Tuesdays and Thursdays: 7:00 PM - 9:00 PM

## Class Locations:

Manassas Presbyterian Church (8201 Ashton Ave, Manassas)

Manassas Baptist Church (8730 Sudley Rd, Manassas)

Bethel Lutheran Church (8712 Plantation Ln, Manassas)

Manassas Park Community Center (99 Adams St, Manassas Park)

Online via Zoom

**How to Get Involved:** Learn more about becoming a trained volunteer teacher and being part of our empowering team. Sign up to attend a Volunteer Information Session by following this link (copy and paste in your browser):

<https://beaconliteracy.org/get-involved/volunteer-application/>

For further information about this exciting and rewarding opportunity, contact [Jmorazuniga@osbva.org](mailto:Jmorazuniga@osbva.org)

**Join us in making a difference through literacy!**

## Community Collaborations:

# Making Education Accessible and Affordable

BEACON is delighted to announce an exciting new partnership with Manassas Baptist Church, which commenced with the Fall 2023 session. This collaboration expands our offerings to include three morning classes and four evening classes, further enhancing our ability to provide valuable in-person learning opportunities for adult learners within our community.



Manassas Baptist Church has a well-established presence in the ESOL community, boasting dedicated students and volunteers who will now become part of BEACON's program. This partnership underscores the mutual dedication of both organizations to serving adults who aspire to improve their English language skills. By uniting our efforts, BEACON and Manassas Baptist Church will now host additional in-person classes at the Manassas Baptist Church location, enabling us to reach an even wider audience.

"ESOL has been at the heart and core of who Manassas Baptist Church has been for decades," said Rev. Sam Maxwell. "So, we're absolutely delighted this partnership came to fruition with BEACON, and

we're looking forward to the way we'll be able to love our community richly through the gift of learning and language."

Last year, our class site partners—Bethel Lutheran Church,



Manassas Presbyterian Church, and Manassas Park Community Center—generously provided classroom spaces for our English and Citizenship classes, contributing an estimated in-kind value of \$161,452. This figure will continue to grow this year as we welcome back our previous class site partners, in addition to the new Manassas Baptist Church site.

Thanks to the unwavering commitment of our dedicated class partner sites and the invaluable contributions of our selfless volunteers, who, last year, donated an estimated in-kind value of

\$321,879 through countless hours of their time, BEACON is able to provide our classes at an exceptionally affordable rate. We are deeply appreciative of the generosity of our community partners and volunteers, which play a pivotal role in supporting BEACON and our adult learners.

For the remarkably low price of just \$65, adult learners can enroll in our 12-week class sessions, which includes two 2-hour sessions each week (excluding holidays). At this cost, our classes are more budget-friendly than a simple cup of coffee per class meeting. This affordability reflects the unwavering commitment of our community to empower individuals through education.



Furthermore, thanks to the continued support of our generous class site partners, volunteers, and supporters, BEACON is able to provide scholarships to students who may face financial constraints and cannot afford the class fee. This inclusive approach ensures that educational opportunities are accessible to all.



# Get to Know the BEACON Literacy Team

It's been a while since our last newsletter, so we'd like to take a moment to introduce or reintroduce you to the dedicated individuals who make up our team:

## Program Assistant- Julie Bossart



Julie Bossart joined the BEACON team in mid-September. She has been a Manassas resident since 2001 and originally hails from Hagerstown, MD. Julie's unique background includes parents who immigrated to the U.S. from Peru, making her fluent in both English and Spanish. Prior to her role

at BEACON, Julie spent an impressive 26 years at IBM. In her leisure time, she enjoys family and friend gatherings, attending concerts, hiking with her husband, and embarking on both domestic and international travel. She's also a sports enthusiast.

## Program Manager- Lisa Alphonso

Lisa Alphonso has been a part of BEACON since late December 2022, and her journey to the U.S. began in 2017 when she moved here from Guyana. With more than 26 years of experience in the financial industry and a history of volunteering, including with HABITAT for Humanity, Lisa brings a wealth of knowledge to her role. She resides in Manassas with her fiancé and has an upcoming wedding in early November. Lisa's passions include road trips, dancing, and music.



## Volunteer Coordinator- Jennifer Mora Zuniga



Jennifer Mora Zuniga has been a vital part of BEACON since 2016, with a career in adult education spanning more than a decade in Northern Virginia. Her journey back to Costa Rica with her husband and two children led her to the remote role of Volunteer Coordinator in 2022. Prior to her Volunteer Coordinator role, she served as BEACON's

Executive Director. Jennifer's background includes Peace Corps service in Costa Rica, and she's fluent in both English and Spanish. In her free time, she relishes moments with her family, embraces hiking, visits the beach, and explores new destinations.

## Executive Director- Jennifer Katac

Jennifer Katac has been with BEACON since November 2021, bringing with her more than 23 years of experience in the nonprofit sector, with many past roles working with volunteers. As a Returned Peace Corps Volunteer (RPCV) from Panama, Jennifer is fluent in both English and Spanish. Beyond her role at BEACON, she volunteers as a mentor to at-risk youth and actively engages in outreach within the Spanish-speaking community. Jennifer resides in Manassas Park with her husband, and her interests include knitting, gardening, photography, and embarking on road trips with her spouse.





# Scrabble® Scramble Fundraiser

Competitive Scrabble, Prizes,  
Food, Raffles, and Silent  
Auction to benefit:



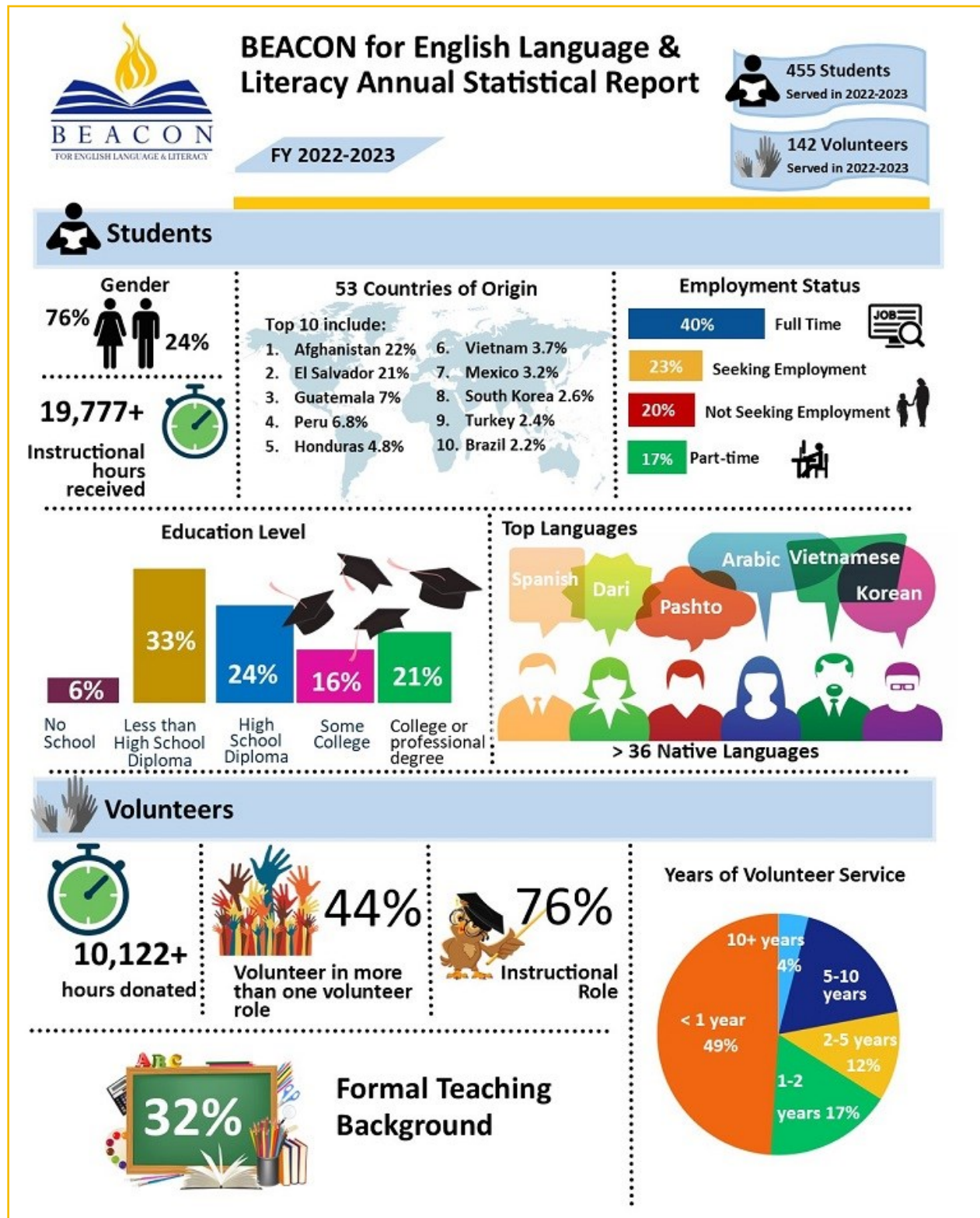
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# Thank you for being an integral part of this incredible journey!

Below and on the next page is BEACON's Annual Statistical Report for the fiscal year concluding on June 30, 2023.

This report stands as a testament to the unwavering dedication and collaborative spirit of our community partners, supporters, volunteers, students, and staff, all of whom played a pivotal role in making this year yet another resounding success!





# BEACON for English Language & Literacy Annual Statistical Report for the Fiscal Year 2022-2023



## Program/Services

Total Classes this Year



39 classes online

46 classes in-person

- 8 summer conversation classes
- 6 FREE Learning Circles
- 16 One-on-One Tutor Arrangements



- 2 Citizenship Panels
- 2 Employer Panels
- 2 Resume Workshops

Students by Location



3 class site locations + online



## Noteworthy achievements

Estimated Combined In-Kind **\$161,452** in donated space from our three generous class partner sites:



Estimated In-Kind **\$321,879** in volunteer time

Thank you to our Corporate Sponsor:



Catalogue for Philanthropy: Greater Washington declares BEACON "one of the best" local nonprofits

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To learn more, please call us at (703) 368-7491, visit our website: [beaconliteracy.org](http://beaconliteracy.org) or follow us on social media:



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Have an idea for a newsletter article? Email [jkatak@osbva.org](mailto:jkatak@osbva.org).

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