

Women's Class Relaxes Into English

If you were to arrive at ICS on a Saturday afternoon at around 1:45pm, you might catch a glimpse of something extraordinary: a circle of 20 women, refugees who have fled wars in six countries and their American volunteer tutors, holding hands, dancing and singing the "hokey pokey."

You would have caught the end of a breathing and relaxation session that opens the women's English class at Saturday School each week. Led by volunteer tutor and healing practitioner Sophie Caballero, the women practice breathing deeply and standing with the correct posture and alignment. The sessions are part English lesson, part yoga, part meditation, and part bonding session. The purpose is twofold: while learning English vocabulary geared toward introducing the day's lesson, the women prepare to learn by letting go of the stress that comes with daily life as a refugee. Incorporating songs and movement, the sessions frequently end in impromptu dancing.

Sophie explains, "what I've learned from my work is that if we reconnect to our breathing, if we help the nervous system to calm down, we can listen better, we can see better, so we can learn better." She explains that the stress of surviving—not just in refugee camps but in the world—causes us to be rigid.

A brief session with four girls from the Saturday School teen girls' class has shown positive results. Juggling classes, tests and assignments while satisfying extra responsibilities at home, the girls' priority continues to be their education. Sophie counseled the

girls on test taking, suggesting that, when taking a test, "it is best to put your feet on the floor, breathe three times silently, and make yourself comfortable where you are sitting." One of the girls reports that she follows this approach whenever she has an exam. "When I do that, it makes me forget other things in the past and makes me concentrate more on what I'm doing now," she says.

Claire Hamilton, an elementary teacher at ICS whose elementary-aged students have also been working with Sophie's breathing and meditation techniques, states that by setting aside time each day to be calm and peaceful, she has seen her students able to "stay calm in stressful situations, and relax and refocus when we need to." She reports that her students have exhibited more peaceful attitudes and less hyperactivity.

Yang Li, teacher of the Saturday School women's class, uses this kinesthetic approach as another way to enhance her students' absorption of English. Instructions such as "breathe

through the nose" and "let's feel our legs and our feet on the floor" incorporate both nouns and verbs with physical examples.

But the benefits may go deeper than language acquisition. At the end of one recent session, a veteran Somali student spontaneously reached across the circle and pulled a shy new student from Burma into the middle with her. At first reluctant, the Burmese woman obliged, and soon she broke into the first smile her teacher had ever seen on her face. Then the two women—joined by common experiences and their desire to become self-sufficient in their new country—held hands and danced. They moved their hips in something like celebration, surrounded by the circle of their classmates, who clapped in encouragement.

This display of trust exhibits what Saturday School volunteers and supporters have known for some time: that surviving war is not what makes our students unique. Rather, it is their determination to transcend war by learning to live and succeed in their new country that reveals their strength.

