Giving Gratitude for Michael, Our Veteran English Conversation Volunteer

December 14, 2021

This week, we are giving gratitude to our longest serving English Conversation Volunteer, Michael Wagner, who has been volunteering with us for 13 years! Michael shared this photo along with the lovely memory that goes along with it - “I included one picture that is very special to me. Members of my [English Conversation] group surprised me at a Yale Veterans Day ceremony three years ago!” Thank you, Michael, for all of your public service over the years!

Tell us a bit about yourself, and what led you to volunteering with OISS?
I'm a retired senior Air Force medical officer, originally from Western Pennsylvania and the oldest of 14 children. I have 5 children and 22 grandchildren with two more on the way. My life has been centered around helping others and giving to others, and so it was just natural for me to discover a new way to do that. OISS needed program volunteers, and I had a lot of military experience working with many people from across the world and some basic foreign language skills, so it married up very well.

What have you enjoyed the most about being an ECG facilitator?
I enjoy so many things about being a facilitator. The first aspect is effectively helping members of our International Community not only with conversational English, but in many aspects of everyday life in the United States. As a transplant to New England, I'm still getting used to the differences here, so we learn together. The key word there is “together,” so therefore the second aspect is that my family and I learn so many things about others and their own culture and language. I know we learn more than we have ever been able to give to others. The numerous friendships I've made are very special to me and my family.

What is one thing you've learned about our international community since you've been volunteering with OISS?
Generally speaking, most of our participants who have never been to the U.S. before have a lot of misconceptions...
about Americans and life in America. These have been formed by mass media, literature, social media, domestic education, and movies. So many people are very surprised to learn that life here is not like the movies or the news reports!

Can you think of a specific conversation or experience that stands out while you’ve been volunteering? Every conversation and experience is special to me, but one that stands out occurred a few years ago at an Independence Day Fireworks Potluck Party at my house. A thunderstorm popped up and everyone grabbed food and ran inside. We had 108 people in my small house! The folks from OISS were all together in my living room, and I encouraged them to get out of their comfort zones and meet others…to use the conversational skills they had been so anxious to develop. The next thing I knew most were playing with my grandchildren and making even more friends. Children have a lot less trouble communicating…no matter what their language level. That experience catapulted those ECG participants to a much higher level of confidence in their abilities.

What would you say to someone who is considering joining our English Conversation Groups as a participant? To steal a phrase from Nike, “Just do it!” It's a great way to improve your conversational English…safe, non-judgmental, a great way to make new friends from around the world. I guarantee that your English vocabulary, reading, and writing skills are as good as or better than most Americans I know, so this is a perfect opportunity to improve on that.

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