As the semester comes to a close, OISS would like to take the time to introduce you to the incredible volunteers that work with OISS to facilitate our English Conversation Groups each week. These volunteers have worked with our office in different capacities over the years, but we are especially grateful to them as they have kept our English Conversation Groups going throughout the pandemic and transitioned from in-person sessions to holding these groups over Zoom. Their resilience and dedication is unmatched and we could not be more grateful for the work they do with our international community.

First up, let's introduce you to Suzanne Cooney!

Tell us a bit about yourself, and what led you to volunteering with OISS?

I started volunteering with OISS in the mentor program and the Thanksgiving Dinner program. I befriended a graduate student, Elizabeth from Nigeria. She was attending the Forestry School. Elizabeth and I are still friends and keep in touch with WhatsApp. I visited her in Lagos when I traveled to Africa. So becoming an ECG facilitator was the logical next step.

I graduated from Yale School of Public Health after being an Ophthalmology nurse for 11 years. I then worked for the CT Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services for 31 years as Director of a Community Mental Health Center, and at a Psychiatric Hospital and then in the Commissioner's Office as Director of Business Administration. I grew up in New Haven and lived in Germany for a year. Travelling is a passion of mine. COVID has put a halt on traveling. I have traveled to Africa, Italy, Spain, France, India, Japan, and Ireland. I have Irish citizenship through my grandparents. All four of whom were born in Ireland and immigrated to the U.S.
What have you enjoyed the most about being an ECG facilitator?

Learning about the cultures and use of language of the different countries of the ECG participants has been very informative and interesting….and a lot of fun. Contrasting those cultures with the United States “culture” facilitates each participant’s learning about the US and other countries. Pointing out the similarities and differences across all the cultures is a great way to begin to understand each person and their approach to life. That process creates a bond among the group.

What is one thing you’ve learned about our international community since you’ve been volunteering with OISS?

The Yale international community is very eager to learn and experience all they can about the USA……how we communicate, think, live and have fun. They are interested in all things “American”. And they are eager to share their country’s way of life with us. I have learned so much from each ECG participant. This experience contributes to each of us feeling that we all are “global citizens” and has things more in common than are different.

Can you think of a specific conversation or experience that stands out while you’ve been volunteering?

There are so many great experiences. Two ECG participants, one from China and one from Iran, asked me to help them with their applications to graduate school. They each were here with their spouses and were eager to continue their education while in the US. We spent many hours over several visits developing and honing their personal statement. That process required not only fine tuning language grammar, but also use of words. It was a learning experience for each of us. Both were accepted to graduate programs, one at Boston University and the other at Dartmouth. I was so happy for them and to have played a part in their journey here in the US.

Another wonderful experience was with the spouse of a postdoc. She had a dog that she brought from Finland. She wanted to get involved in some of the US dog shows. Since I have a dog that I show it was a great match. However COVID got in the way of going to dog shows but we got together weekly for dog play dates. We became fast friends, and when it was time for her to deliver her baby, I kept her dog for a week. She named her baby boy a name I had suggested. We remain friends and keep in touch via WhatsApp. Many former ECG participants keep in touch via Facebook. It has been a wonderful experience to have these international friends.

What would you say to someone who is considering joining our English Conversation Groups as a participant?

Join the ECG program! It is very rewarding. So much to give and to receive from the participants….so much to learn. When talking with them and thinking about their comments and questions, you think about our own country and culture and see it from a different perspective! ECG participation broadens one’s outlook for sure!

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