

Claire Darmstadter

Hey everybody. I'm joined today by Kathy Stamos, English language teacher at Northcentral Technical College in Wausau and former president of Wisconsin TESOL. Thanks so much for joining me today.

Kathy Stamos

Thank you.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah. So before we dive into all the great things you've done over your career and are still continuing to do at present, could you just give us a really brief overview of your linguistic and educational background and maybe how you got started in teaching?

Kathy Stamos

My bachelor's degree was in teaching English and I had a minor in Spanish. And so I did that for about five years in the K-12 system before I left to be a stay-at-home mom for eight years. And then I kind of backed into the current career that I'm in. A mutual friend found out that I had an English degree. And she asked me if I would fill out paperwork to be her substitute. She was teaching ELL at our local campus of NTC. And I said, sure, I can fill out paperwork to be a sub. And then they called me and said they had an instructor who had quit, and the semester was already underway, and would I be interested in starting as an adjunct instructor like tomorrow, and I had never taught ELL before. But I remember in my head thinking, okay, I'll be kind of like teaching Spanish, but in reverse. So I thought, okay, I'll do it. And so I agreed to be an adjunct instructor, very much last minute, and I had no experience doing that. But they gave me a really awesome mentor teacher, who was just wonderful at *you can do this, just think about what they need to know* and how you can create that environment for them to learn it. And so I kind of backed into it. And then I just fell in love with it. fell in love with every group of students that I had. And so then I went to UW-Eau Claire, and I got a master's, Master of Education professional development specialist specializing in TESOL.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, I can imagine the stress of starting off, but that sounds so cool that you have so many supports in place, and you just really came into that position. If I understand correctly, I believe you work primarily with international students, as well as like adult English language learners. And you know, it's often, not always, but often significantly harder to acquire language later in life, both from a cognitive perspective, but also just like stressors of life and having a job and maybe having kids and just all these other responsibilities. So how do you work with your students to keep them motivated and moving forward in their language learning journey when at times, it feels like, oh, my gosh, this is just another thing to add to my plate, I'm so stressed, I can't take time to, you know, learn English and spend all this time doing homework and classes and all these different pieces that it might require.

Kathy Stamos

Yes, absolutely. And that's one of the things I really love teaching adults, because I taught middle school and high school before I had kids years ago. And, you know, when you teach high school, it's always kind of like, do we have to do this, I don't want to do this, and whatever. So you do a lot of motivation. But with adults, I don't need to do any motivation, because they know they need to learn it. I mean, they would not have come to the campus if they didn't realize that there was a need for them to learn this. So the adult students, I would say, are generally super motivated. And for most of my time at MTC, I worked with a scholarship program for international students that were from Central America, Mexico, and the Caribbean. And they were only here for two years, and then they went back to their country. And so not only were they really motivated, but they knew there was a limited time that they had to learn this. So I always said it was like having a whole class full of National Merit Scholars because they were all like super great students, leaders, and, you know, *I need more practice on this, can you give me more homework*, so that I can learn this faster and whatever. So it was kind of like a teacher's dream come true. Now, I teach local residents in our district, not international students. And so then it's much more of an issue with as you said, life gets in the way, you know, your car broke down, or your kids are sick, or you have to work overtime this week, or whatever. And so other barriers pop up in their life, but they're always super motivated to learn English. In fact, generally, they're very impatient to learn English. Like, I need to know English right now. And it's like, I'm sorry, it doesn't work that way. But, yeah, they're very motivated.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah. And I know you mentioned that you worked a lot with some populations who most likely are from Spanish-speaking backgrounds, but imagine you have many students you work with, who don't speak Spanish and you don't have that common language to work with. So when you have students who first come to you, and they don't speak any English and you don't know anything, in a language that they speak as their first language, how do you kind of interact with them at first?

Kathy Stamos

Yeah, and, you know, I worked with a lot of Spanish speakers for the first part of my career with the international students. But now, I work with primarily Asian students. Our biggest language minority population here in Wausau is Hmong speakers. And I don't speak much Hmong at all. And it's a very hard language to learn, and so with level one students that speak Hmong or another language that I don't know, we use a lot of visuals, a lot of repetition, a lot of acting things out. I always say you have to be willing to make a fool out of yourself when you're an ELL teacher. Wear comfortable clothes, because you'll be like moving all over and doing body language. And so we do a lot of that with level one. It's a lot of patience on my part and their part.

Claire Darmstadter

For sure. And you kind of hinted that Wausau has a pretty large population of either refugees or people who have family members that are refugees, and a very large immigrant population. And you know, there's all this great work that we're doing, but there's still a pretty pervasive general and even specifically related to language, discrimination component that occurs. So how do you

try to combat some of this? And maybe what are some barriers that these individuals may face whether it's linguistic or just general in daily life that Wisconsin residents who don't have this background might recognize?

Kathy Stamos

Well, the Hmong population in Wausau is one of the largest per capita Hmong populations in the United States. And so, and the Hmong have been in Wausau since probably the 80s. And so now the population has grown to such an extent that there's quite a bit of language support available for Hmong speakers in Wausau that you wouldn't find elsewhere. So, as far as language barriers for most speakers in Wausau, not a lot. And as far as discrimination, I don't know, I tend to view every group that I work with, with very rose colored glasses, and I think they're all wonderful and can't understand why anyone wouldn't think so. So, I mean, I'm sure there is that discrimination that still exists in some cases, but I think generally, there's pretty widespread support for the Hmong in Wausau and the Marathon County area. It is kind of surprising though, how many people still don't understand why the Hmong population is here in Wausau. And so it always surprises me when I have to explain that to someone. But we're trying to get the word out. For those students with a much smaller, less popular language, like I had a student for a couple years, that was a Farsi speaker, and there's not nearly the population here. So that's harder to find language support, you're not going to be able to go to their local bank and find them a Farsi speaking teller, like you would with Hmong or Spanish, so...

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, and you're involved on that more local level, but you also just finished up your term, I believe, as Wisconsin TESOL president, so you kind of had that broader perspective. Can you just talk a little bit about the work you did there and any other professional organizations or resources that people who are interested in TESOL-related education careers may want to check out?

Kathy Stamos

Sure, Wisconsin TESOL is an organization for people involved in language teaching across the state, and it could be English language teaching or bilingual education. And our goal is to try to connect all of those professionals to one another so that they can support one another and enjoy some professional development together. We are about evenly split in Wisconsin TESOL between K-12 educators and adult higher ed educators. It's pretty evenly balanced. And so we have an annual conference where we provide professional development. This last November was our first ever virtual conference which I'm sure is common across the United States in the world right now. But we're also starting to organize more regional professional development opportunities. We have some in the Fort Atkinson area and over in the La Crosse area, and now that we've become a little more comfortable with the virtual programming action, I think we'll be doing more of that in the future. But it's a great way for people to connect with other English teachers. And if you're in a small rural district, odds are you might be the only one there. So a statewide organization or even the international TESOL organization is a great way to connect with other professionals and get some support for what you're doing.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, for sure that department of one — that's real. And that is a hard thing to do. So finally, before we close off today, can you just give us one reason why we should celebrate multilingualism? Why it's a good additive thing for someone to have?

Kathy Stamos

Oh, wow. I feel like diversity is what the United States is all about. And you know, what makes us different, makes us a richer culture as a whole. And it's really sad when I see immigrant families where the next generation has lost the heritage language, because it's so important for us to keep those languages for, you know, our shared history, and it enriches our society. So I don't know. Multilingualism is what makes the United States what it is. It just makes us a richer group. It's a complex story. Our story as a language is a huge part of that.

Claire Darmstadter

For sure. Well, thank you so much for taking a couple minutes to talk to me. I think your perspective both as being like an educator and someone in professional organizations and more admin or higher ed role is really valuable. So I think people will really enjoy this conversation. I appreciate you sharing a couple of your thoughts.

Kathy Stamos

Thank you so much. My pleasure.