

Claire Darmstadter

Hey, everybody, I am so lucky to be joined today by Nancy Pike, Outreach Coordinator with Immigrant Advocates of Barron County. Thank you so much for taking a couple of minutes to chat with me.

Nancy Pike

My pleasure.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah. So can you first just give us a really general overview of your educational and linguistic or teaching background and how you kind of came to working with this group?

Nancy Pike

So I don't have a formal background beyond some graduate-level education in child development as part of a clinical psychology program that I did not finish. So I had a little bit of an introduction to some ideas about educational theory, but definitely not a formal degree, or training. So I started as a literacy tutor, working in the Barron area, and have had wonderful relationships doing that both with the Barron County Area Literacy Council, which is the nonprofit that fosters the tutoring in our area. And also with the friends I've made doing that work. So it's sort of a co-learning environment in which I've learned so much about usually Somali language and culture, but sometimes Spanish language and culture and Latino/Latina culture and teach English to the best of my abilities such as it is, and citizenship. That's been my real strong point in recent years.

Claire Darmstadter

And if I understand correctly, I don't believe you're a fluent Somali speaker —

Nancy Pike

I tell my friends I know, Mom Somali *sug, sug, sug*, you know, wait, wait, wait, you know, *fadhiiso*, sit down, that kind of stuff. No, I wish I did. It's a beautiful language. And someday I hope to study it with the sort of intensity you need to actually learn. But I try to pick up what I can. That's a goal.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah. And so when you're working in that literacy teaching position, of course, for some of them, they have no background in English. And so it's like, oh, my gosh, how do I teach them this language when there's absolutely kind of like nothing that we have in common linguistically? So what are some strategies you use? Is very much based on pictures, do you have an intermediary translator? How do you be an effective teacher in that space?

Nancy Pike

For me, it's relationship based. So most of the time, when I'm working one on one, I'm often working with moms with small kids, because those tend to be the folks who can't go to more organized classes, in places like libraries and the Technical College. And so it's really easy to

build relationships over the shared experience of parenting, so for me, that's a shared experience. And just goodwill, I don't know how else to put it, but when you enter with an open heart in mind, and it, I've just never had a problem with communication, because it's been returned with such interest in love and care, a really strong interest in learning English, because it's so necessary to survive and flourish in this community. And then an interest in building a relationship with me. And so, I'm interested in building a relationship with them. So we figure it out. And I've never had interpretation help for learning. Now, I have had interpretation help with specific situations that arise where a problem needs to be solved. But that's kind of rare, frankly, because in this community, it's really hard to get that assistance. And, and most of the folks I work with have really good English, very functional workplace English, and often they're looking to do is to gain the reading writing skills to go along with that functional English, so that they can, you know, meet their goals for their family and for themselves in the workplace. So, there's a lot of accommodating me, especially in the early years. There was so much patience, when you are not familiar with the language, you know, the sounds are so foreign, and it takes a long time to even really understand names. So, it helped me to be thrown into situations where I felt totally overwhelmed and embarrassed a lot of the time, because I think then that gave me hopefully some compassion for how it felt on the other end to not understand my English.

Claire Darmstadter

So you're in a little bubble where everybody is very supportive of linguistic diversity, I would assume, but looking at the wider Barron community, would you say that that's matched? Is it hospitable to people who speak non English languages? Is there kind of like signs all over that are translated or what does that look like out in the community?

Nancy Pike

I imagine that it is a very English-dominant place to be. I can't really say for sure, because I don't usually go about my daily life thinking about that because that's the privilege I've got. But reflecting on that for just a moment, I can't. Well, I think the Barron Area Community Center has some bilingual signage, maybe I think there have been efforts made in certain places by certain people. And, and definitely there are any members of the community who have worked hard to try and make it a very welcoming place. So, there's a lot of positive there. But I also have zero doubt that it's enormously difficult to navigate in this community, as in any other English-dominant community without that fluency in English, because people just assume, and they don't mean to, but if you haven't had the experience of being in a, in a situation, where you don't know the language, I think it's really hard to understand how difficult that is and how even when you begin to have a certain fluency, the things that can get misunderstood, or, or the things that are scary, I'll give you a concrete example. The library is really fabulous about wanting to be welcoming, and they've taken some concrete steps, like making sure there's material available and and visual signage, you know, celebrating Ramadan, in turn, and celebrating Somali Independence Day, those sorts of things. But I am still aware that some of my friends are uncomfortable going into the library and getting a library card. And it's, it's nothing anybody's done wrong. It's nothing, that the librarians could necessarily do differently, because they're trying very, very hard and always asking what, what more they can do, but it's just scary to go in and sign paperwork and, and not be 100% certain you totally understand

what you're signing up for. So I think that's a good example of where even when you're working with an organization that really values diversity and values reaching out to folks who are speaking different languages, that it's hard to be comfortable and truly make it accessible for everyone. Yeah. And so that's not a reason not to try.

Claire Darmstadter

Yes, that is certainly true. So with the group, Immigrant Advocates Barron County. So as of recent, there's been a really large focus on family reunification related to the Somali population. Can you just speak a little bit about the topic, why it's important and how you've been trying to advocate for them in that space?

Nancy Pike

I will, I'll just start crying now. I usually take a little longer to get to this point, but maybe I'm tired today. There are people living without their children, for years, and still, for no reason other than bureaucratic slow down. And the thought, first of all, of having to separate from my children. And I think not everybody realizes that this is done as absolutely the best thing for their kids. Living in a refugee camp is impossible. There's not enough food to feed your kids. And there's no jobs for the most part in the camps that I've heard about in Kenya and Uganda. That actually, as an aside, is why people take that dangerous journey across the Sahara, in the Mediterranean to Malta. Because in Malta, you can work and send money back to your family and feed them. So that's why people are risking their lives every day as we speak. Because they want to work and like all of us, they want to give their children a future. So the reason why this is so personal, and I can't talk about it without crying is I've watched a number of friends go years now years and years, waiting for their children. And we're not talking 30 year old kids, although some of them are approaching that now the oldest but you know, nine year olds, 11 year olds, one friend had four teenagers living on their own in Kampala, Uganda major urban area. Still still they are there. The oldest is now I think 19. So, you know, three years ago, that the oldest was 16. Can you imagine having your four children -- I can't. So why do I do it? Because it's wrong. It's wrong, that these families are separated and if it happened to you, or you know, you would be bereft beyond words, and so what can you do but try and help and I'm just so sad that so far it's had absolutely no known effect I can discern. But hopefully all the voices being raised on this issue all across the country will be to something someday very soon.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah. So thank you for sharing that with us. Because you said it's a very emotionally charged topic. I think it's important that people are aware. I will leave resources and links in a transcript if people want help send letters or watch documentaries, or just any ways that they can be able to —

Nancy Pike

Yes, like the documentary on our website, thank you, I should have been thinking more strategically. Yes, we do have a documentary covering the stories of a number of separated parents in the Barron area. And that's available for view on the Immigrantadvocatesbc.org

website, and also some advocacy letters you can download and join. And the outcry asking for these families to be reunited just as soon as humanly possible.

Claire Darmstadter

Yes, for sure. And so the name of the group is immigrant advocates, berrien. County, not Somali advocates, Barron County or another similar title. Because in the past, or even at current too, you've worked with other immigrant populations. So can you talk about some work in that area? And how you may connect with local or larger groups that aren't necessarily focused on just a Somali population?

Nancy Pike

Absolutely. The goal of the group Initially, I think, was to do two things. One, recognize that anybody who is not solely of Native American heritage is a descendant of immigration of former immigrants. And so to develop a sense of humility and compassion, about the immigrants of today, remembering that so many of us were the immigrants of yesterday. So that was one point. And then the other big point was to say, so how can we help? So the viewpoint of the group is to do our very best to be welcoming, and to listen, are we perfect at that? I have no doubt No. But that's the goal. And so some of the pieces that have reflected different aspects of Barron County's diversity would be making some attempts to work towards driver licenses for all. Honestly, we got in at the tail end of that campaign, and that the bill had failed before we had managed to organize ourselves into doing much organizing, and, but some of us did educate ourselves on the topic and are waiting for another opportunity to be a more effective advocate. Clearly, there's a difference in advocacy when you're talking about populations that are vulnerable and scared about being reported to immigration authorities. So I think we've been aware that in our rural area, that there are many people feeding our country who have vulnerabilities and needs that aren't respected or always known. And so I think the work we've done mostly there is trying to have those conversations, educating ourselves, rather than doing as much directly with people who are in that situation themselves. So we hosted a showing of a movie about how impossible it is for young people with DACA status to go to college, because the expense is just so exorbitant because they're charged as if they were coming in from Paris, you know, foreign students, and when they've lived someplace almost their whole life. So that was one issue. Probably the most successful outreach this group has done is the English and citizenship classes tutoring out of the libraries in Rice Lake and Barron, those had been wonderful experiences and a lot of relationships were made. Rice Lake tends to have more of the Spanish speaking population, and Barron more of the Somali, but certainly, they're diverse places. And that's been hard to watch in with COVID. And hopefully it will come back when COVID is over. We've tried to do some online stuff, but it's a small community and a small number of volunteers. So so far, there's not the online presence that I wish there was and if anybody listening to this wants to help, I hope they will find me courtesy of our website or you I suppose.

Claire Darmstadter

Yes. COVID has made things so hard. And I think people often think like, oh, it's a smaller communities that don't have as many cases and you can just do it online, but especially with

language, it's really hard to understand even if it's your first language online sometimes and so trying to do that in an additional language through the computer, there's WiFi issues. It's a lot. And so I know you guys are all doing incredible work and you're doing your absolute best but sometimes it just feels like there's just nothing we can do in this space because it just is not practical for people.

Nancy Pike

And if I could inject the tech, the unequal access to tech is hugely problematic. So most of the folks that I work with on English or citizenship don't have their own computer like I'm fortunate to have with their high-speed internet access. And I know that's well recognized now as a major problem, but it just can't be underscored enough that, you know, needs to be fixed. So, all right.

Claire Darmstadter

And so to add things on, perhaps a happier note, so I feel like all the time, or at least frequently, there's a big focus on pushing English at the expense of another language or just making English the only focus. But we tell little kids all the time that it's a superpower to speak more than one language. So can you give me one reason why it's a superpower that these individuals in your community or just in general, people speaking more than one language, why that's something we should celebrate?

Nancy Pike

Because it brings a richness to everyone, a connection to other times other places in their own lives, but in our world, as well. It opens up new ways of understanding you're the expert on language, but I know enough to know that you don't say things the same way in different languages and to a certain extent there's flavors of what is said that are unique to language. So the more the more language, the better understanding I think of our human experience and of each other. There's a beauty aspect to it that I personally find very satisfying to listen to and to be part of a polyglot environment, is that the right term? It's musical. It's wonderful to hear. I mean, and that's true to have different ways of speaking the same language, right? That's one of the interesting things about getting into a more diverse appreciation of culture and people is that even folks who share Spanish, you know there's a lot of different ways of speaking Spanish. And how cool is that? So just like we appreciate different different ways of interacting with the world and food or culture, language is just a beautiful way to appreciate our unique identities. And then there's the practicality of it. So boy, am I jealous of my bilingual, trilingual, quadrilingual friends, because you can reach out to so many more people, you can solve so many more problems. It's an awesome superpower. I wish I had it. Someday maybe.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah. Well, thank you so much. I know you're very busy. And you're working tirelessly on all these campaigns, all your efforts. And so it means so much that you took a couple of minutes to chat with us. I hope you have a great rest of your weekend.

Nancy Pike

It was a great pleasure, Claire, thanks so much for the work you're doing.