



## Friends of Portland Adult Education

### From the FPAE Chair

By Rob Wood

The 2021-2022 school year finally concluded at the end of June. The previous three semesters had posed new challenges as we all emerged from two years of Covid restrictions. For the spring semester, nearly half of the 1500 students chose to continue their learning remotely—and we were ready. The



**Rob Wood, FPAE**  
 President & Board Chair

staff had greatly improved virtual instruction and the hundreds of loaned hotspots and chromebooks were well maintained by the dedicated student tech team.

Eventually, the bustle of full classrooms returned and hundreds of students needed bus tickets.

Most noteworthy, Portland Adult Education (PAE) has smoothly transitioned its administrative leadership. Anita St. Onge began her well-deserved retirement on July 1 after six years of admirable leadership (having promised only five!). She was sent off with a boisterous party attended by more than 60 supporters. She did

PAE (and FPAE) well and deserves our gratitude.

PAE's new Executive Director, Miyabi (Abbie) Yamamoto, assumed leadership on August 1.

I am sometimes asked how FPAE carries out its mission to support the students and staff of Portland Adult Education. A simple answer would be "whatever is needed." A more detailed answer follows.

**For the first six months of 2022,** FPAE spent \$107,759.61 supporting PAE. More than 50% of these funds was raised from foundations. Below I have listed the largest areas of support with supporting foundations, as relevant.

- **Workforce Development:** \$47,000 from Bank of America, TD Bank, Norway Bank. Projects included ELL Work Readiness, Teller Training, Nursing and Radiology Prep, Certified Nursing Assistant Training.
- **Student Technology:** \$24,000. PAE currently has 600 computers and 300 hotspots to be used by

the 700 students learning virtually. A dedicated staff of teachers and assistants somehow manage this.

- **PAE Course Scholarships:** \$18,000 from the Evergreen Foundation. Last year 102 students, primarily asylum seekers and refugees registered for 155 courses

*continued on page 2...*

# FALL 2022 Newsletter

## INSIDE

Letter from the PAE Executive Director .....	2
Inspiring Life-Long Learning .....	3
Greater Need, Greater Challenges.....	4
Music in the Classroom .....	4
Graduation Celebrates Networks.....	5
Building Community: The Culture Club .....	6
FPAE Supports Summer English Classes in South Portland.....	6
Grateful Grads.....	7
PAE Executive Director Anita St. Onge Retires .....	7

*From the FPAE Chair continued...*

and received \$19,846 in scholarships. Most of these courses were upper level as the lower ones are free, and most students are headed to college soon.

- **Writing Center:** \$4,000. Staffed by PAE teachers, the writing lab has excelled in assisting individual students achieve better writing skills to be applied in their classes and work sites.
- **Metro Single Pass Bus Tickets:** \$9,000. A surge in asylum seekers receiving public housing support has caused many students to be housed in distant hotels. Unlike younger Portland students who receive city supported bus passes, our students need to show a full-price bus ticket.
- **Staff Development:** \$7,000 from the Maine Community Foundation. t
- **FPAE Administration:** \$2,719. FPAE has no paid administrative staff. Thank you, Board Members and volunteers.

We have had a busy year at FPAE helping to support Portland Adult Education, and look forward to a productive 2022-2023 ahead. Many thanks to all the Friends who continue to be generously behind us in our efforts. *f*

## Appreciative graduate

In a recent networking email, a former graduate wrote:

*“I graduated from Portland Adult school in 2015 after completing my GED. I went on with college, and in 2020, I graduated from UMaine Orono in chemical engineering... I can't thank you enough.”*

## Letter from the PAE Executive Director

I am pleased to write this column as the new Executive Director of Portland Adult Education (PAE). I have worked in the Maine immigrant community since moving to Portland in 2018, first as a board member and then as the founding Executive Director of Maine Association for New Americans (MANA), an immigrant-led, mutual-aid organization focused on first- and second-generation immigrants. The PAE Directorship gives me an opportunity to continue working with my colleagues and partners from a different position, but in just as meaningful way.

My relationship to immigration involves my lived experience, family histories, and professional research. My Japanese father spent his early years in northeastern China and experienced the collapse and subsequent complete reversal of national values in post-World War II Japan. I grew up hearing about the arduous travel back to southern Japan from northeastern China, the national-level confusion, poverty, and mass-level loss of life that followed—a world very different from the rich 1980s and 1990s Japan I grew up in, but that almost all the adults around me had lived through.

My mother, an American immigrant to Japan and a scholar of Japanese literature and culture, had grown up surrounded by those who fled Nazi-occupied Europe. She would sometimes share secret stories about one



**Miyabi “Abbie” Yamamoto**, New Executive Director at Portland Adult Education

of them in a hushed voice, afraid that even in far off Japan, someone might hear the story and cause trouble for her relatives.

I grew up visiting my maternal relatives in Canada and the United States, but I never felt like I got what America or Canada was about. First of all, I

spoke remedial English and couldn't engage in complex conversation, nor understand English that was not my mother's. It turned out I really wasn't getting it. After attending Japanese schools my entire life, I attended an international school in Canada on full scholarship at age 17. While I was in great company there because many were attending an English-based school for the first time, when I went to college in New York, I struggled both socially and academically. This was my first true border-crossing experience.

Growing up, I often felt alone as a racial and ethnic minority in a country that claimed to be monoracial. That's why I wanted to learn about how to exist as a minority from the ethnic Korean community in Japan (zainichi Koreans), the largest ethnic minority in Japan at the time. For my doctoral research, I focused on twentieth-century women's writings from colonial Korea (1910-1945) and imperial Japan. This showed me the hierarchies of oppression in a colonial context and how the legacies of colonialism live on in national structures, policies, and people. Through my research and studies

about twentieth-century Korea and diaspora Koreans, I also learned about the chaotic and dangerous movements between the Korean peninsula and Japan during 1945 and 1953 that had a different inflection for (ethnic) Koreans than for Japanese people trying to repatriate, like my father and his family.

My impression is that people who are able to immigrate peacefully, more or less out of choice like me, are relatively rare. Even at the international school in Canada, I had a classmate who was a Sudanese refugee, a Pakistani friend who was tasked with getting his fam-

ily out of Pakistan, and a Rwandese classmate who had come immediately from post-genocide Rwanda, among others. For me, learning with them on that campus was about opening up a whole new world and survival was more of a metaphorical issue. Perhaps for some of my friends on that campus the issue of survival was more literal. Nevertheless, learning together gave us a common experience that still binds us together.

The classroom and places of learning—even if not the same classes—can give people different ways to connect. The content can be practical,

academic, or just for curiosity. The multitude of ways to connect is even more expansive in spaces where the instructor might be similar in age, or even younger than the students, like at PAE.

My vision for PAE is that it continues to support newly arrived and generational immigrants and immigrant communities in the multi-layered ways that it has, and to continue expanding its reach to become a truly diverse community of all learners. I hope you will join me in this exciting journey, as a learner, teacher, staff, or community member. **f**

## Inspiring Life-Long Learning

**By Catherine Eliot, RN**

One of my favorite experiences as a PAE teacher is to run into former students who are now in the workplace plying a trade that they studied at PAE. This has happened at hospitals,



**Catherine Eliot, RN**

long-term care facilities, doctors' offices, and even over the phone when I'm calling a medical office. PAE students are everywhere! My CNA students would often get hired in the facilities where they did their clinical training, so they would be on staff when I brought in the next group of CNA trainees several months later. It was so gratifying to see the new students working side by side with the students who had graduated and been hired. As time went on, my former CNA students were mentoring and supervising the newbies.

Over the past few years, several CNA students from Portland Adult Ed have gone on to get their nursing degrees at USM. One remarkable USM graduate, Aimee Biba, was hired by PAE in 2021 to fill the CNA Instructor position that I was retiring from. Aimee had been my student and now I was delighted to work with her as a profes-

sional peer, providing mentorship as she took charge of the CNA program.

Aimee received her education as a registered nurse and nurse anesthetist at Institute Supérieure de Technique Médicale in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), graduating in 2002. She worked at a large teaching hospital, Clinique Universitaire Kinshasa, while raising a family with her husband. In 2012 she and her husband brought their 5 children to the U.S. to start a new life because the DRC was "not secure, not a safe place to raise a family." They wanted "a better life for the kids."

In Portland, Aimee started working as a housekeeper at a large hotel, and began taking Level 3 English classes at PAE. She said some of her early jobs in Portland were not very welcoming, and she experienced discriminatory attitudes and unfriendliness from some co-workers. But she felt comfortable at PAE, describing the environment as "inclusive and supportive." She worked with Sally Sutton (at New Mainers Resource Center) on transferring her credentials and getting credit for her education in DRC. Unfortunately, for most healthcare professionals arriving in the U.S. and hoping to practice, there is little acceptance of foreign credentials or education, and starting over is the only option.

Aimee describes some of her adjustments: "I had to repeat my education. And I had to learn about the U.S. healthcare system: the professional culture is different, the equipment is different, but the science is the same. There are more computers and electronics used here in the U.S. and better internet access because of economic realities. There is more hands-on medical care in DRC."

Sally helped Aimee map out a pathway for getting the necessary nursing education, starting with classes at PAE. She took Medical Terminology and Bridge to Healthcare classes at PAE, then started taking nursing prerequisites at SMCC and finally transferred to USM.

Of her educational journey in the U.S., Aimee says, "You have to be determined and disciplined." In addition to her personal education goals, Aimee was providing support, encouragement and stability to her 5 children. Two of her sons have graduated from USM, one son is still a student there, and another son and daughter are in high school. Aimee chuckles when she recalls her time at USM: "I was taking some classes with my son, who is now an RN at Maine Medical Center. We would study together for quizzes and exams!"

*continued on page 4...*



### **Inspiring Life-Long Learning** *continued...*

Aimee graduated from USM 4 years ago with a BSN nursing degree and has been working at Maine Veterans' Home in Scarborough. She was hired to head the CNA program at PAE in December 2021. She says she loves teaching, being around the students and learning from them. She also said "It's important to have teachers from different cultures who speak different languages."

When I asked her what was difficult about her new job, she said that some of the technology and Google Classroom took some getting used to. But she loves working at PAE and said "it feels like family. This is the best place I've ever worked."

Aimee taught her first CNA class in the Spring of 2022, and graduated 6 stu-

dents. They all passed the Maine State CNA Certification Exam, and all of them are working at New England Rehabilitation Hospital (NERH) on Brighton Ave. in Portland. NERH has been a commu-



**Aimee Biba** and her classmates at graduation from PAE's CNA Program.

nity partner, sponsoring CNA classes and clinicals with PAE, since 2017.

Aimee's trajectory at PAE, from student to teacher, is a result of her gritty

determination and perseverance. It shows that PAE's goal of providing educational empowerment and support to our adult community is working, with the help of a network of community partners in education and the workplace. It also illustrates a wonderful feedback loop: Aimee is one of many former students employed as teachers, IT professionals, and administrative staff at Adult Ed. These employees come from Maine and around the world. They bring their life experience, multilingual skills and multicultural experience to serve the current student body.

And all of this reflects our mission "To inspire lifelong learning in a culturally diverse environment." **f**

## **Greater Need, Greater Challenges**

Our return to in-person classes during the 2021-2022 Portland Adult Education (PAE) school year highlighted a growing crisis for our most vulnerable students: transportation.



An overwhelming number of asylum seekers registered for classes this year and most needed help getting to the school from their temporary housing, such as hotels in South Portland and Yarmouth. Finding they did not qualify for student passes or ticket discounts, FPAE started buying single-ride bus tickets at \$2 a ride and made them available to those in need.

In total, FPAE spent \$9,000 on bus tickets during the 2021-2022 school year.

In addition to lobbying Metro for discounted ticket pricing, we are hopeful that several Portland-area community groups are preparing to propose other solutions to this challenge. Given the urgent desire of asylum seekers to educate themselves and become valuable members of the community, we must find a way to easily and efficiently connect them to the first-class learning opportunities offered at PAE. **f**

## **Music in the Classroom**

Music in the Classroom is the type of program FPAE was established to support. While basics are covered by school budgets, it's the fun add-ons that can really make a difference in reaching students. And for adult education, trying to reach students after a long day at work and/or caring for children requires all the fun we can find to add.

English teacher Amy Thompson stepped up to provide such an experience for her students by applying for a "Teacher Projects" grant from FPAE.

The award enabled Amy to bring Lisa Redfern, a singer songwriter, into ESOL classrooms to teach students songs and help them write their own class songs. The session helped students learn vocabulary and idioms in a new and meaningful way, and to understand and practice rhythm, pacing, stress, intonation and pronunciation. Lisa's visit livened things up in a fun, low pressure environment where students could practice and learn.

Kudos to Amy Thompson for bringing 114 students in Levels 1-3 the opportunity to use English language skills in new and creative ways. We look forward to receiving many more such applications from PAE teachers in the year ahead. **f**



# Graduation Celebrates Networks

**By Anja Hanson,** as published in Amjambo Africa

Graduations illuminate networks, the quiet webs of people supporting each other. Just watch as people file out of a ceremony, notice the presenting of flowers and blossoming of hugs, and you witness networks in action.

At Portland Adult Education's graduation on June 16, 2022, nearly 70 individuals earned high school credentials, but few of those individuals stood alone. Among the graduates were a mother and daughter, aunt and nephew, hus-



Graduates of the Portland Adult Education Class of 2022

band and wife, and many close friends. Those family members and friends pushed each other to stay awake in classes after working night shifts or fed children during remote classes. They offered a net to support the graduates, and they put in hard work.

It is these same networks that enabled 35 former PAE students to graduate from Southern Maine Community College and University of Southern Maine this year. Guay M. Kelly, one of the SMCC graduates, invited his former PAE teachers to his graduation, writing, "I can't celebrate this victo-

ry without you. All your advice and support made me achieve my goals. I really recognize that and appreciate it. So, please, don't miss this event." After the ceremony, he sent dozens of joyful photographs. They weren't just pictures of him with his teachers. They were images of all the former PAE students he knew and had stayed connected to as he completed his degree.

Sometimes when we speak about diplomas and degrees, we focus on the skills or prestige conferred. But what PAE students know is that attending school and obtaining credentials is only part of the reward. They know that, by studying among peers and with teachers, they are networking. They are binding their futures to those of old and new friends. Sophie Musasa Leu, graduation speaker at this year's ceremony, closed her remarks by thanking staff, friends and family, "You built the ladder for me to climb."

With thousands of students each year, we rarely have time to promote Portland Adult Education. Fortunately, the student networks are strong. Students coach each other to sign up not only for courses, but also for programs like Teller Training, Medical Assisting, Education Academy, and College Transitions. One former graduate brought her adult son to PAE within days of his arrival in the U.S. She had earned a diploma, but she knew that he was a good candidate to pass the HiSET (the

test Maine uses instead of the GED). He passed the HiSET within a couple of months and marched at graduation. He's now eligible for the new free community college opportunity offered to Maine graduates impacted by the pandemic. That's how a net should work.

In a recent networking email, a former graduate wrote:

*I am not sure if you remember me, but I graduated from Portland Adult school in 2015 after completing my GED. I went on with college, and in 2020, I graduated from UMaine Orono in chemical engineering... I can't thank you enough.*

*I copied my friend to this email because he is a recent immigrant, trying to pursue the same pathway as mine. I therefore referred him to you since you are the person that directed me. I will leave it to you both to plan on how he can successfully pass the GED test and how he can access all the required information and materials to pass it.*

Networks aren't just for corporate executives or computer engineers. Networks at Portland Adult Education are ladders for all to climb and webs to catch us when we slip. Fall term will begin on September 12, 2022, but during the summer, students will be driving friends and walking family to the front desk to join the PAE network. We welcome you! **f**

## PAE Receives \$60k Donation from Bank of America

A \$60,000 donation from Bank of America will enhance Portland Adult Education's workforce training programs and student career services. The generous donation — the second one that Bank of America has made to PAE's workforce programs — will create tailored opportunities for Maine's multilingual populations and will help meet the state's workforce needs.



## Building Community: The Culture Club

FPAE supported the formation of PAE's Culture Club led by Rodrigue. The challenge was to bring together the new immigrant community with long time PAE lifelong learners in an atmosphere of inquiry and celebration. The first year was successful and FPAE has continued its funding.

As Rodrigue Mahoua reports:

*PAE Culture Club hosted its first seminar about the Democratic Republic of Congo. Several DRC students participated in the seminar, which covered languages, music, dance, and food. We were overwhelmed by the number of ethnicities and linguistic layers that we discovered.*

Eritrea was the topic of the second presentation. In addition to music, dance and food, beautiful pictures of Eritrean architecture were shown, and a member of the Eritrean community answered questions. A documentary about the Pygmy people of Africa was presented during our third presentation. Seeing the change between a short video published in 1930 and the most recent video was fascinating. Our final presentation focused on Sudan. A PAE graduate provided interesting comments and stories that were enjoyed by all.

Following each presentation, the featured country's cuisine was served as part of the community meal. The pro-



*Participants in the first meeting of The Culture Club*

gram was informative, interactive and well received. As a result of attending our seminars, a community member wrote: "Please take this to the community out there". **f**

## FPAE Supports Summer English Classes in South Portland

Since the fall of 2021, hundreds of families seeking asylum have been arriving in Portland. Due to the lack of housing, the City of Portland was forced to seek alternative living arrangements, the majority of which were hotels in South Portland. Approximately 180 of these families are being housed at five hotels in South Portland. Among their many needs, the parents in these families need to learn English as quickly as possible. Needless to say, PAE could not accommodate several hundred more students.

Enter Friends of PAE (FPAE) partnership expertise!

From April 4 to June 9, 2022, FPAE partnered with the Greater Portland Immigrant Welcome Center and In Her Presence to collaborate in providing English classes to these families. Congregation Bet Ha'am, which is within walking distance, donated classroom space. We offered four basic English classes twice a week and served approximately 100 students during the 10-week session.

Throughout the summer, classes continued. From July 11 to August 18, approximately 80 students took advantage of the program. The six

classes offered included three for students at the beginner level, two for hi-beginners, and one for intermediate-level learners.

FPAE is proud to have helped make the summer program possible by acting as fiscal agent for the project and contributing \$5,000 for expenses. Other donors included East Point Community Church, which provided classroom space as well as transportation to and from the five hotels currently housing the students. The WEX Community Fund awarded \$5,000, the University of Southern Maine's ESOL department contributed two teachers, and the Root Cellar also contributed a teacher as an in-kind donation. Scholarships for Maine Immigrants contributed \$1,000. In all, these gifts enabled the group to hire four teachers, a coordinator and a part-time interpreter for the program. In addition, the donated funds covered textbooks, notebooks and other learning materials.

### Leveraging Resources

Portland Adult Education (PAE) provided intake and placement tests for the students who finished the summer session, enabling them to register

for fall classes in any adult education program. Approximately 40 students registered for classes at PAE.

Seeing the need, South Portland Adult Education (SPAEE) applied for and received a grant from Maine DOE Adult Education department to provide classes, transportation and childcare for these students during the next 18 months. Plans are underway to hire teachers, interpreters and a coordinator for this program. The South Portland School district will provide transportation by school bus at off hours. Avesta housing has donated two classroom spaces.

Because of FPAE's support, students and administrators got a head start in preparing for this new program in South Portland. **f**



## Grateful Grads

With her note that follows, Anja Hanson, Academic Advisor for Portland Adult Education, reminded us of the critical role PAE and FPAE play in helping our students reach their education and life goals.

*I am excited to attend the SMCC graduation to see 31 former PAE students earn degrees. Another alum of PAE and SMCC just told me that she graduated from USM last weekend. Her grades were so strong that she graduated summa cum laude (with the highest distinction). Amazing! I am so proud of all who are earning certificates and graduating from training programs or college.*

And Anja shared a note of thanks from Axels Samuntu who received a scholarship from FPAE in 2019 that enabled him to study public health:

*I learned my Graduate Certificate in Public Health on May 7th, 2022 at USM.*

*Thank you so much for the \$1,000 scholarship you gave me in 2019 when I received my High School Diploma. During my speech [at the award ceremony] I said my dream is to earn a Master's Degree in Public Health, today my dream is close to becoming true.*

Axels and his family are pictured to the right. **f**



## PAE Executive Director Anita St. Onge Retires

by Liz Love, Assistant Director, PAE

For six years “Captain” Anita steered PAE through calm and stormy seas



with optimism, humor and determination.

Under her leadership PAE gained reliable WiFi, 800+ de-

vices and 300+ hotspots for students, multilingual staff in multiple roles, a culture that increasingly honors multi-

lingualism, huge growth in workforce training programs, a student representative on the PPS board, increased funding and resources, and a leadership team always striving to learn. She successfully navigated us through the COVID pandemic, and we emerged transformed with online and in person learning opportunities for students.

One of her most revered qualities was her trust in her “crew.” She believed in the ability of every member of the PAE community—staff, teachers and

students alike—to create a culture of innovation, growth, and collaboration. She would say her job was keeping the doors open, but if you look within those doors, her impact is visible in every facet of what has made PAE a stronger, more ambitious school. Thank you, Anita, for everything. We wish you “bon voyage” on your next adventure steering a barge in France! **f**



Captain Anita and her PAE/French crew at her retirement party! June 2022



### **Donations are always accepted**

You can give anytime in many ways to support the students and staff of Portland Adult Education:

Mail donation to FPAE, P.O. Box 3185, Portland ME 04104

Electronic giving through PayPal at [friendsofpae.org](https://www.friendsofpae.org)

Gifts of stocks contact Rob Wood at [friendsofpae@gmail.com](mailto:friendsofpae@gmail.com)

### **Get FPAE updates by email**

Sign up now to get FPAE newsletters, reports, and updates in your email inbox. Go to [friendsofpae.org/email](https://www.friendsofpae.org/email) to learn more!

*Graduation photo credits: Molly Haley [www.mollyhaley.com](http://www.mollyhaley.com)*



**Friends of Portland Adult Education**

P.O. Box 3185

Portland, ME 04104