

Update on Adult Education Podcast
Episode 7: Voices from the Field
with Barbara Gibson, Luisa Jacqueline (Jackie) Bonilla Santos, Elaine Randall, and
Marty Finsterbusch
July 2019

[Music]

Barbara Gibson: We are very pleased today to have three student leaders who have been involved in adult education programs, who have taken on larger roles in leadership and in sharing their stories and providing resources and information to other students and to adult educators and adult literacy folks around the country. They're here in Virginia at the Adult Education and Literacy Conference and sharing that information. And, they've been kind enough to agree to be interviewed and to share it on this podcast series so that we can learn more from them and share their stories more broadly and the information that they have.

I'd like you to each tell us your name and just a little bit about yourselves. I'll start with Jackie.

Jackie Bonilla Santos: Of course. Well, my name is Louisa Jacqueline, but you can call me Jackie. I'm here as an au-pair. That's a cultural exchange program. I am 26 years old and I have a bachelor's degree of nutritional food science back in Mexico City.

Elaine Randall: And my name is Elaine Randall. I have been working in the adult education field now for 32 years and how I came to work in the field is I started as an adult learner and got involved with my local program. Got a job at the state level and have just been active in adult ed for many, many years now.

Marty Finsterbusch: And my name is Marty Finsterbusch. I was a student in an adult ed program, in a literacy program in Delaware County in Pennsylvania. Next thing I know, I start working at that program - start doing stuff at the state level. Next thing you know, I'm operating a national organization called VALUEUSA, which is the alumni of adult ed. And now, I've been involved on a national level of adult literacy, oh my God, for almost 20 years on a national level.

Barbara Gibson: Obviously, all of you have had experiences in adult education programs. You've succeeded in those programs and, and moved on. Can you share with us what made you decide to enroll in an adult education program or an adult literacy program?

Jackie Bonilla Santos: Well, for me, I started because I was mainly interested in really in the ESL program to practice my English. But, I got really interested in the book they were reading - the class in the GED[®] education. And, I just say why not? And, I've had a great time. I loved every time of it.

Elaine Randall: And for me, I had difficulty in school right from the beginning. I had an undiagnosed language-based learning difference. And so, I did stay to graduate and get a high school diploma. I had learned in high school when I was filling out job applications for high school jobs, I saw one of the questions was, "Are you a high school graduate?" and it was a way

of covering up so nobody would know about my reading. I knew I had to get that high school diploma.

A few years later, I decided I wanted to do something about my education but I didn't know where to go, where to look. And, in the early 1980s, it was before a lot of the public awareness campaign. I would call different places and they didn't quite get it. I'd say I was looking for a program to learn to read and they'd say, "This is for your child". No, this is for me. You mean you need to learn to read? Yes, I need to learn to read. It was humiliating! So, I totally gave up. You know, it, it just didn't seem worth it. And then, my mom, in '86, saw an article about a literacy program opening up. It took me a long time because I wanted to do it, but on the other hand, 12 years I went to school. I was never successful. Why was this going to be any different? Was I just setting myself up for another failure and more humiliation? So, even though I had made up my mind I wanted to, it still took another six months before I was really ready in myself to make that phone call. And I really had a lot of apprehension if it was going to work or not.

But, the program that I got involved with, they matched me with a volunteer tutor who personality-wise our lives would never have met. She was a mother of two. I was in my 20s, but it was such a perfect match that, I guess I'm going to kind of jump ahead to one of your questions.

When I first started, I had given so much – 150 percent of energy. But you can't keep that kind of energy up. And I realized that she was putting together a curriculum of work for me that really only would take me about a half an hour to do. So, at first, I was very "gung-ho", but as time went on, the feeling of school and all those emotions came back to the point where it was time to leave for tutoring and I thought, well, maybe I can call to cancel or, you know, lie and say I forgot about it, you know. But, I was old enough, responsible enough, to say okay I'm just gonna go. I'm gonna tell her that I didn't do that homework and I apologized and I felt awful and it's just, I could have done it. I know I should have. I know how much work you put into it. And I expected to either have her get angry with me or just give me "the look" that, you know, and anybody who's taught it understands that teacher look of disappointment. She totally blew me away. She said, "Oh, okay. Well, if you have a chance to do it next week. So, what I've got planned for today . . ." Totally left me off the hook.

I just couldn't. It's like. no. teachers don't do this, you know. I just couldn't fathom it. But realizing that half an hour work probably took her two hours to put together. So, for me, it was motivation to do at least as much as, you know, to do what she, as much as she was doing. And my motivation motivated her and became a snowball effect. So, now that working in the adult at field, when I talk with adult learners, you know, I also kind of explain how to look at things a little bit different from when you were kid to now and how things can be very different. And, I'll pass the mic on. More to come later.

Marty Finsterbusch: My story's a little different than most. Why I went into the literacy program is, again, I have a severe learning disability diagnosed fairly young, so they took me out of regular school and put me in special ed, but it was a special program. It took in like seven different counties and we were the guinea pigs for the learning disabilities. So, we're talking the

70s and the 80s and, you know, they tried diets on us. So, at school we had friends but after an hour bus ride, we're excommunicated from the community because we were the guys on the small little buses. And so, there's something wrong with you, you know?

So, all my life I heard, "What's wrong with you? Are you retarded?" This, that, and the other. And so, my self-image was really low because all I heard is something's wrong with you all your life. But at school, I had other peers and equals, but it was gone when you went home.

So, I finally graduated and I graduated with honors, but I didn't have the skills that I know I needed. So, you have to understand, I grew up low middle class, row home house, right outside a big city area. Education, my father never graduated. In fact, he dropped out of school at third grade. So, education wasn't a high priority in my household.

So, my goal for myself was to get a college degree before I died. Well, I couldn't get it. I didn't have the skills to go into college. No one could help me because I had that high school diploma. So, I went back to that special ed school and said, "What am I to do? No one can help me. I have a high school diploma." So, they actually got me in contact with the local literacy program and I went in and I got evaluated at a fourth grade reading level. And what happened was, I was placed with a one-on-one tutor. And, um, he's still my friend now after thirty some odd years. We're still very close friends. And, so, it was an issue of self-confidence of rebuilding.

And, so, you don't understand because education wasn't important in the family. They couldn't comprehend that I wanted to go to college. Literally, I would hear from my own family, "Why, you don't want to be like me?" Um, I'm very proud of you, father. You were a meat cutter and our family had everything we needed, not what we wanted. I'm not putting you down. But, actually, my father did not talk to me for almost two years because I went into a program to improve my reading. So, sometimes your own family that's stacked against you don't want you to learn because of their background, their images, and so forth.

So, my goal of getting to that is to get a degree, a college degree, before I died. That was my driving force to go into a literacy program. I have an associate's degree right now and it took me 10 years, but I still want that bachelor degree before I die. But, do I really want to take on the system to get it and the money that goes with it? So, yeah, I would love to have a bachelor degree before I die now. But, that's where I'm at.

Barbara Gibson: Well, Marty. I think anybody who knows you and knows of your work knows how much you've achieved and how much you had to fight for it. And I think that's not at all unusual. That many of our students, we certainly heard from Elaine, where you're fighting every moment of the time - that you were contemplating, "How am I going to get where I need to go? How can I connect with a program or something that's going to help me or someone who's going to help me? And then, after you're in there, it's still, you know, it's that fight. And, I think that's the wonderful thing that you all who have gone through it and maybe in some ways are still experiencing it in one way or another, to share with other students and it's what we can do in our own programs, too.

So, I'd like to skip ahead a little bit. I know we've talked about the questions we want to ask, but I'd like to get a little bit more into the advice that you would give someone who is thinking about going back to school in an adult education program, or an ESL program like you were in Jackie, and isn't quite sure if they should take that risk to do it because I think you've both outlined there are a lot of risks involved - family issues that you had with your father. Your own personal concerns, Elaine, when you were not sure whether you should. You were embarrassed and it was hard. You had a lot of things to overcome.

So, what advice would you give a student or somebody who would like to be a student but hasn't made that decision yet?

Jackie Bonilla Santos: Well, I would say just to question yourself, how, if you really want it and if you really want it, to really don't care what others say. It's you who's gonna be going to class. It's you who's gonna get your diploma. So, you really wanna, really the most difficult decision is just take the first step. Just go, go for the first class. If you like it, keep going and you will be one step closer to that diploma.

Elaine Randall: Actually, this kind of gets into what I do for work at the Resource Center. It, we, do information and referrals so I talk a lot with people who are looking to get information to get into a program. Sometimes the individuals, they just want the phone numbers and that's it and they want to get off the phone, you know. So, I give them just what, respect their wishes, but if I can get them talking a little bit more then I'm able to hear a little bit about where they're coming from, what they're looking for, and be able to, kind of, give them a different way of approaching it. Especially someone who had difficulty in school, they, no matter what their age if they're in their 20s or in their 70s, they're still carrying that baggage with them.

So, I'll let them know when you get into school remember, you're not a kid anymore. But that little kid is going to be screaming in the back of your head. All those feelings and emotions you had are going to come right back. But remember, you are an adult. Your cognitive skills are fully developed. Your life experience, your reasoning skills. You've held jobs. You raised family. You've used your common sense. Those are your strengths going into an adult ed program. So, whenever that little kid in the back of your mind says, "I can't do it!" Be the grown-up. Tell them it's okay. Go take a timeout. Take a nap. The grown-ups are busy right now. And look at adult ed in a different way where you do have a lot of the pieces.

Think of it as, like, a huge jigsaw puzzle where now it's time to take what you know, start putting the pieces together, adding new pieces in a way that makes sense to you. Use those skills, survival skills, that you have been using all your life because you can get from A to B. Sometimes you have to go all the way to Z and back to get there. But you have figured out a way. Now you're using those skills in a different way and figuring out this code of the English language and that it is difficult. Sometimes if the conversation is going good talking about, like, spelling and the letters, like, for the long sound of "a". There are eight different ways of spelling it and four of them don't even have the letter "A". So, it wasn't you. The English language is very confusing. It's a mix, made up of many different languages. So, be patient with yourself. Usually, in conversation I find out they're patient with everybody else, but not themselves.

So, use that patience that you have for other people and apply it to yourself. If you're not ready, you have these phone numbers. Put it in your wallet for a week, a month. But when you're ready to make that call, you know you're gonna be ready. And take that first step, you know. And instead of seeing it as walking off of a cliff, seeing it more as a new adventure. Be curious about things instead of having your mistakes beat you up about it. See it more like Sherlock Holmes. I see this and I get that, but how do those two fit together? Make learning more interesting for yourself instead of what you did from when you were a kid. So, those are some of the things that I pass on to other adults who are looking to get into programs.

Barbara Gibson: I think that you're demonstrating the value of having someone who has been in adult education or an adult literacy student on the phone when someone calls and wants that information, especially if this is the first time they've ever made that call and has gotten brave enough.

Yeah, you might have carried the phone number around in your wallet for a few months. Having somebody like you who's lived it really makes a difference.

Elaine Randall: It's also speaking the same language, understanding something. A practitioner can say something and it won't hit at a gut level. But an adult learner to adult learner, there's a connection there that they understand. They really totally get it and having someone that, who is working in an office, my gosh, how, you know, how can a student be working in an office? Maybe there is hope for me after all. Maybe it is possible. Maybe this program will make a difference and will be successful.

Barbara Gibson: Marty?

Marty Finsterbusch: Two things actually jump up if someone's coming into a program or wants to go into a program. Realize that it will take time. It's not, I'm going on a diet and I'll lose 20 pounds in a week. It's the same deal. It's a long-time commitment. It's energy. So, you have to realize that going into this that if you're 0-2 in your abilities and spelling is not great one, it's going to take you four years or whatever. So, be prepared that it's not going to be in nine months you're gonna be in college. So, knock that right out of the ballpark and understand that. It's going to take some time.

And then the other thing is now from me knowing the field, it's finding the right program for you. Because the door you walk in might not be the right program for you. Actually, the right program for you is right down the street. The problem is it's the person with the less skills is the one trying to find that right program for themselves. That's been a big problem. So, if you're going to think about what do you want. Is this program right for me? Is there another program in the area that's better for me for my needs? Are they more catered to my needs? But that's hard for us as adult learners with the less skills to figure that out. But that would be my advice for someone coming into adult ed. It's going to take time and is that program right for you or is there another one? And there are the two big ones for me.

Barbara Gibson: I think that's very important. It's hard for us especially when we think about school and healthcare. We have a hard time getting that second or third opinion in healthcare

because the doctor or the health care provider is supposed to have all the answers and it's hard to break that and go, "Well, maybe he doesn't or she doesn't have all the answers. Maybe, I should go to the doctor down the street and see." And, I think school sort of has that same aura with it and I think that's such an important point. That it's not a failure if you start in that program and it just doesn't work for you. It doesn't feel right. It's class, maybe it's classroom instruction and you really feel as if, if I just had a tutor it would really help. Then that program will help. Or, vice versa maybe the one-on-one situation if you're a very social person and you like interacting with a lot of people, one-on-one might not be the right situation. So, I think that's really good to remind people of that.

Elaine Randall: Also, the skill level. Usually when people call, "I want to get my GED®". That's great. That's a great goal. But after I talk with them, if they can't get through a sentence, they can read the whole sentence, but if they're reading word-for-word and have no idea what they read, even if hopefully a pro or GED® program would never accept anybody and set anybody up like that. It's important that they find the right program and let them know. You want to be successful with a GED® program. They're going to expect this, this, and this. This program here will help you keep your goal. I'm not saying you can't get your GED®, but you want to be successful in getting your GED®. So, what do you need to do in order to take one step at a time to work towards that goal? It's never impossible. It's what you need to do to be successful?

Marty Finsterbusch: Or job training.

Elaine Randall: Or job training.

Marty Finsterbusch: Or going to college. Or whatever. It's the same piece as what's right for you and how do you get there.

Barbara Gibson: There is so much more that we could discuss and I know our time is short and it has been a very long day, especially for those of you who've been presenting today. But, I really appreciate your taking the time to talk with us and to share your experiences and your advice with not only our adult educators and adult literacy providers, but also with students.

I hope that folks who find these podcasts will share your interview especially with their students because I think you have some important information and insights to share. So, thank you very much for being with us today.

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This transcript has been edited for clarity and may not reflect the audio-recording verbatim.