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Shopping For a New Coat

When I lived in Portland, Oregon, I taught English as a Second Language at a local community college. I had adult students in my class from Vietnam, Mexico, Russia and many other countries. They had one thing in common; they had a desperate yearning to learn English.

Many of them would work in a factory for twelve hours through the night and take a bus in the morning straight to our 8:00am class. They waited until after class to go home and sleep. Sometimes I would see them struggling to keep their eyes open during our class. They were hard working, earnest, eager to learn.

Of course, I needed to use a lot of pictures and hand gestures, since I didn't know all of their respective languages. I taught them a simple sequence of dialog called "Shopping for a New Coat." They enjoyed standing up and acting out the gestures that accompanied the text of the "Shopping for a New Coat" story.

We developed a wonderful rhythm and rapport during the class. One particularly bright female student from Vietnam later married another student from the class, a young man from Romania.

Despite their collective lack of sleep and amount of work, I noticed that the level of attendance and attentiveness in class was usually excellent. Some of them had as many as three jobs and took the bus everywhere they went because they could not afford a car. Valentina from Russia, who was 79, would walk to class every morning, even in the cold or rain.

Sometimes I second-guessed myself and wondered if I was really teaching them the best way possible. But I gave my all to this class and they gave their all to me. If nothing else, they would always remember what to say if they ever went "Shopping for a New Coat."

On the last day of class, they threw a terrific party that was brimming with good food and laughter. I was amazed that they had learned enough English to even coordinate such an event with each other. The food was eclectic and delicious, including wonderful dishes from over ten different countries. A Russian woman gave me a dozen roses. A Vietnamese woman gave me a little case of make-up.

The whole class chipped in to buy me a new coat. In all my days of teaching college classes, I had never experienced something like this. These were people who lived in small apartments, sent money

back to their relatives in their home countries and barely could feed their immediate families. Their gratitude for my simply doing my job, teaching English, was beyond the bounds of what I ever expected.

I wear the coat they gave me all of the time; it's my favorite. Navy blue on one side, Navajo design on the other side, reversible, with a drawstring. Every time I wear the coat, I think fondly of them. Valentina from Russia, Thuyen from Vietnam, Maria from Mexico, Vladimir from Romania, Xavier from Guatemala, all of them.