

AN INTERVIEW WITH SHEILA NICHOLAS

By Jane Carwana, Conestoga College

TESL Ontario honoured Sheila Nicholas with a Distinguished Contribution Award in November 2017. This award “is designed to recognize and honour the significant long-term achievements and contributions to the advancement of English Language educators, the English Language training sector and/or TESL Ontario.”

Nicholas, Program Manager of Adult ESL and LINC at St. George’s Centre for ESL in Guelph Ontario, has certainly contributed leadership and expertise to the ESL community. In addition to her role as Program Manager, she has chaired the Boards of Directors with both TESL Ontario and the Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks and served in various other committees and boards.

I recently had the honour of chatting with Sheila in her office in Guelph. Her enthusiasm for the ESL profession was evident throughout our conversation. Not only does Nicholas continue to volunteer her time within the ESL profession, but volunteerism was actually the force that launched her career journey.

Jane Carwana: What first drew you to the ESL profession?

Sheila Nicholas: There was an advertisement for a volunteer position at St. George’s ESL program. After spending a year and half doing research in Zimbabwe for my doctorate in Political Economy at Queen’s University, I returned to Guelph to complete my dissertation. It was an isolating time for me and I was craving being with people from other cultures. So, I volunteered. The ESL program was growing and within a few months I was hired as a teacher. I never intended to be an ESL instructor. But after a while I realized that I loved it and I felt it was where I should be.

JC: It’s interesting how volunteerism can lead you to an unexpected outcome...a whole career path, in your case!

SN: Yes, I once volunteered with a learner from the Nuer tribe of Southern Sudan. They had almost no written language except some that was recorded by missionaries. I worked with her for quite a few months. Several years later, I ran into her. She was doing translation for someone. She was doing well and was happy. She was teaching Nuer at the Catholic Board’s International Languages Program. That she went from a non-literate person to a language educator was amazing to me. She loved to teach. I think about her every now and again

when I see learners struggling with literacy. I think keep going! It's possible.

JC: What was your first teaching assignment?

SN: I taught literacy in the morning, where there were some preliterate learners in the class. In the afternoon, I taught CLB 7–8. It was fascinating. I got to see people developing their literacy skills in the morning where there was almost no conversation. In the afternoon I'd be with intermediate learners and have fabulous conversations. I really enjoyed it. I loved teaching literacy. You get to see learners' *aha!* moments. I remember one learner from Thailand who'd never been to school before. She was in her 40s and her family was only moderately supportive of her attending school. She was learning to print. For Christmas I asked the learners to self address envelopes in which I mailed them Christmas cards. She was so surprised when she received hers. She told her family "I wrote this!" and they couldn't believe it. She was so proud and it made me feel good. Here was this woman who had never written in her life and she was beginning to acquire literacy skills. It was very rewarding to see people becoming independent. I also loved teaching the higher levels because of the interesting exchange of information, ideas, cultural perspectives and life experiences. I was very lucky to teach those two levels.

JC: What surprised you as a teacher?

SN: I would say that some of the things go back to the literacy class. It really forced me to be aware of what literacy skills entailed. It was surprising to think at that foundational level of literacy. You sometimes have to teach the learner how to use a ruler or scissors. Otherwise, I was surprised at how much the learners opened their personal lives to me. That is a double edge sword. A lot of people enter teaching because they are caring and very compassionate people. For the learners, you are the first Canadian to listen to them. They don't have any friends yet, they haven't connected with their neighbours. The learners see the ESL teacher as friendly and empathetic and they will share some of their most private concerns with you. It can be a challenge and some instructors can get burned out because they are so caring.

JC: How did you become the Program Manager at St. George's?

SN: For several years I had worked as the summer program manager because the program manager had negotiated taking every summer off. This provided me with the opportunity to develop my administration and management skills. Like most program managers, I learned my job by doing it. I was hired to replace the program manager when she retired in 2000.

JC: Do you enjoy your role as a TESL program manager? What is the most challenging aspect?

SN: Yes, I do. I find it very rewarding and challenging. As a program manager you are usually the person who hears the complaints. I miss being in the classroom and seeing the

learners progressing. The challenging part is finding solutions to problems.

JC: What current trends in the TESL profession are exciting to you?

SN: I'm excited about the possibilities that technology brings to the classroom. Some staff are very comfortable with exploring possibilities and they share their success stories with me. It feeds into my interest about learning more myself. We recently did some Professional Development about bringing technology into our classrooms. Have you heard of Kahoot? It's "gamifying" our grammar practice. It's something that the elementary and secondary teachers have been doing, but we haven't done it as much for adult learners. Tutela is another great resource...that whole community of practice. It is amazing that there are people in the profession all across Canada who are adding to Tutela. Many of us are still more comfortable with a paper-based delivery and I'm excited to figure out how to help bring technology into the classroom.

JC: Are there any trends in the profession that surprise you? Why?

SN: I do think that digital literacy is something that all of us are going to need to improve upon because so much of what we do goes online. We need to be more conscious of the importance of this new literacy. This is something that we need to address.

JC: Are there other challenges faced by the TESL profession?

SN: I'll speak for Ontario, because that's what I know best. There are still a wide range of employment conditions that ESL professionals find themselves in. If you work at a college, you might earn a higher salary compared to a community based LINC provider or those working in the private language sector. There's a wide range of employment conditions and pay rates. Quality classroom delivery requires planning and it's not every program that recognizes this or provides their teachers with planning time. You can't just walk in and deliver an amazing lesson. So that's a big challenge. I think many of us working in school boards and community based LINC programs look towards the elementary school boards as a level that we'd like to achieve. Our learners are very respectful of us. There's no doubt in my mind that they see us as an integral part of their settlement process.

To increase our professionalism, we've got our OCELT (Ontario Certified English Language Teacher) designation, we're accredited, we're expected to bring a high level of expertise to our learners and provide high level, relevant language training. We're not always given the recognition. That takes time. One of our challenges is explaining to our funders and the general public the importance of what we do and to continue to advocate for recognition as a profession.

JC: Newcomers to Canada face many challenges. Besides language teaching, what role does our profession have in addressing these challenges?

SN: I think one of the things we can do as ESL professionals is to advocate for school transportation supports on behalf of our learners. For example, the LINC program provides

funds for on site child care. A certain portion of the money can also be used for transportation supports. The provincial funding model is different. It does give flexibility, but there's nothing dedicated from the province's Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration to support the learners in terms of access to childcare or transportation. As ESL professionals, we can encourage the funders to think about ways to help learners to get to classes because once they are here, we'll do the rest. We'll help them learn their language skills so they can get on and look for jobs and raise their families.

JC: School is as much about logistics, as what you're learning, especially when you're a parent.

SN: A female parent in charge of parenting has many challenges. If you work a survival job, a \$6.00 round-trip bus ride is significant. Having the money to get to school can impact whether a learner comes or not. Learners ask, "can I afford to buy bus tickets every day or can I only go to school a couple of times a week?" So that has an impact.

The funders are very supportive and we have to be fiscally responsible as we are using taxpayer dollars. There are many competing needs so everyone is doing the best they can.

JC: What advice could you share with a) pre-service, b) new and c) experienced ESL teachers?

SN: Preservice teachers should be prepared to enter a rewarding profession that allows you to exercise your creativity and make a difference in people's lives.

If you're a new teacher, don't be hard on yourselves when you make mistakes! It's a big learning curve to be in the classroom. Consider it the second phase of your training and give yourself a few years to really develop your skills. Don't be afraid to try something new! Adult learners are so forgiving. And all of us have had that experience of planning something and having it not work. Don't be afraid to say, "Ok, we'll come back to that. We'll revisit that lesson another time." It's all part of the learning.

If you're an experienced teacher, don't forget the joy. It's such a rewarding profession. The people I've met as learners have changed my life. I'm very much at home in the world in that I've met people from all over the world. I see all of the similarities between us and the differences are minor. The profession allows us to see that people are just people.

JC: What do you like to do in your spare time?

SN: I enjoy gardening and hiking. I'm interested in meditation. I read widely and listen to jazz. One of my hobbies is to give back to my profession so I still do a lot of volunteering even though I'm no longer on any of the boards. Part of my hobby is to volunteer for the profession whenever I can.

JC: What motivates you to continuously provide such leadership to the profession?

SN: I want to do my best. I have the will and the time to do it. I enjoy it. I also get a lot back

from it. Volunteering on the board of directors for TESL Ontario and for CCLB, I got so much back. I got the opportunity to develop my leadership and to see the way other leaders deal with situations. It was very important professional development for me. I like the idea of a challenge and learning something new. I love learning and I've never stopped.

JC: Do you have any final thoughts you'd like to share?

SN: I would want people to remember to enjoy teaching. It is such a privilege to be working with our learners. There were days when I didn't feel like teaching, but there were never days when I didn't want to see my learners. It has always been a privilege to be part of the learners lives and I really enjoyed teaching. I can talk about ESL for a long time...I absolutely love it!