

# EXPANDING LIVES

## WINTER 2018 NEWSLETTER

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## DIRECTOR'S LETTER

By Leslie Natzke

Expanding Lives's very first scholars spent the summer of 2008 in Chicago. Every summer since then, an exchange between West Africa and Chicago has taken place. Our young women return home, continue their studies, earn degrees, get married, and work. They also contribute to society as leaders both as a group and individually to show the world (and us!) that investment in them has value for the entire community. One of EL's objectives is to encourage girls to raise their voice. Rahila, a 2009 EL Scholar, is a leader and role model. Here is how she uses her voice and skills to raise up the people around her.

"Expanding Lives helped me in every step of my education. I am currently a Masters student in International Relations at Maryam Abacha University, an institution featuring a bilingual (English/ French) curriculum. For the past four years, since graduating from teacher's college, I have also worked as a junior and senior high school teacher in my home community, an area with a shortage of English teachers and a severe shortage of women in leadership positions. There are only 6 female teachers at my school this year.

Since 2013, I have spent my school vacations working with other young women conducting conferences to empower girls ages 12-14. Our group objective is to transmit skills in peer mediation, English, girls' health, yoga, and leadership to make these girls strong enough to stay in school and become problem-solvers. As one of the older leaders, I am often the facilitator in organizing the trainings and the keynote speaker.

*Being an Expanding Lives' scholar is a transformative experience in the life of a person. Halima is the first girl in Safo, where I teach, who had the chance to attend the EL conference in Chicago last year. Halima is capable, she works hard, and she is able to achieve her dreams and visions for the future. Students respect her at school, which is something very important. To improve her leadership skills, she needs some help from other great leaders. I will continue helping her develop our skills together as we are at the same school.*

*Expanding Lives has done more than helped me. It has saved my life. To give my own contribution, I decided to help the new Expanding Lives scholars who were chosen in my home community to attend the conference by introducing them to the Expanding Lives curriculum before they attended in order to encourage and motivate them. Since 2008, this excellent institution has been changing the lives of many West African girls by making them great leaders who can solve their communities' problems.*

*Expanding Lives represents the key for our development. I imagine how the lives of girls in West Africa will improve if Expanding Lives spreads everywhere."*

**Please consider donating to [Expanding Lives](http://www.expandinglives.org) this year to help us continue both our US programming and the education of young women once they return home.**

**Donate now at <http://www.expandinglives.org>.**

# WHAT HAPPENS IS NOTHING SHORT OF MAGICAL

A few years ago, I reached out to my Aunt Leslie because I wanted to become involved with Expanding Lives. At the time, I had no idea what that involvement would look like, but I needed a new challenge, and since I work with elementary school-aged boys all day, I figured there was nothing farther from my comfort zone than working with teenage girls through EL.

Leslie asked me to help run the retreat, which takes place the first week that the scholars are in America. The girls get off of the plane in Chicago and then drive up to a little cabin in Wisconsin, where they spend a week acclimating and practicing English. That is a serious over-simplification of what happens that week. What actually happens is nothing short of magical.

Most of the time the scholars arrive timid, withdrawn, and exhausted. Besides the deep fatigue that comes with flying across multiple time zones, they are typical teenage girls in a new place – unsure of themselves and how they will fit into this vastly different environment. The American girls are no different, even though they aren't battling jet lag. Insecurity is universal.

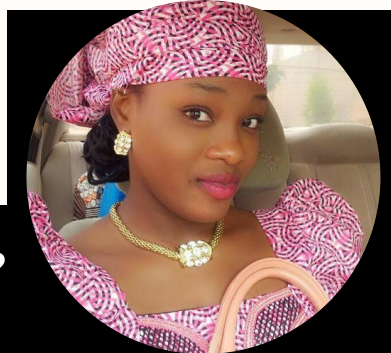
Their first night is laid back, but the rest of the week we challenge them to face their insecurities through risk-taking. They have multiple English lessons each day, as well as ice breaker activities and opportunities to explore the surrounding area. We take them canoeing, bowling, and hiking, English lessons woven throughout. They practice navigating streets downtown, reading road signs, and telling their personal stories. Leadership is the underlying theme – who do they see as leaders, what makes a good leader, how are they leaders?



By the end of the week, the transformation is undeniable. Their smiling faces exude new confidence, the house is full of laughter and multi-lingual conversation, and their arms wrap around each other in support and acceptance. My role shifts from facilitator to third-party observer. Soon they are off to Chicago to take classes on technology, self-care, entrepreneurialism, and English. EL is a relatively small non-profit, but the effects that our mission have on the world are profound. We aren't creating leaders, we are connecting them with each other.

We are equipping them with the knowledge and skills they will need to overcome every social, political, economical, and educational barrier they will face. We are showing them that they're not alone.

- Malinda Forsberg, EL Volunteer



## WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

DJAMILA (2012):

"I SPEND A LOT OF TIME TALKING WITH FRIENDS AND FAMILY, MEN AND WOMEN AND GIRLS, ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF KEEPING GIRLS IN SCHOOL AND HELPING THEM PURSUE HIGHER EDUCATION. KEEPING GIRLS IN SCHOOL SOLVES SO MANY PROBLEMS - EARLY MARRIAGE, HIGH BIRTH RATE, FISTULA, ILLITERACY, IGNORANCE. I TELL PEOPLE IN THE CLINIC AND IN MY LIFE THAT HAVING A LOT OF CHILDREN ISN'T ACTUALLY BEING RICH; HAVING A FEW CHILDREN AND BEING ABLE TO EDUCATE THEM, AND KEEP THEM HEALTHY IS BEING RICH. THOSE CHILDREN WILL EVENTUALLY BE ABLE TO CONTRIBUTE TO SOCIETY. WOMEN CAN CONTRIBUTE A LOT. I EXPLAIN TO THEM HOW AN EDUCATED WOMAN EDUCATES HER CHILDREN AND KEEPS A HOUSE MORE SANITARY SO THERE IS LESS DISEASE. SHE CONTRIBUTES TO THE FAMILY, THE COMMUNITY, AND THE NATION AS A WHOLE."

MARWA (2011):

"A FEW YEARS AGO, A FRIEND MADE ME AWARE OF A PROBLEM. DESPITE HER EDUCATION, HER HUSBAND WOULD NOT ALLOW HER TO WORK. FOR HIM, A WOMAN'S PLACE WAS NOT IN AN OFFICE. I SET MYSELF ON A SEARCH FOR RESOURCES AND FOR A MEANS TO CONVINCE HIM TO LET HER WORK, KNOWING FULL WELL THAT THE MOTHER IS THE ONE TO FINANCE AND SECURE HER CHILDREN'S EDUCATION. THE NUMEROUS EXCHANGES WITH THIS FAMILY HELPED ME UNDERSTAND HOW WOMEN ARE MARGINALIZED AND LIMITED. SINCE THEN, I TALK TO AS MANY YOUNG COUPLES AS I CAN TO ENCOURAGE THE WOMEN TO WORK AT THE SAME LEVEL AS MEN."



# BEING AN EXPANDING LIVES HOST FAMILY

by Julianne Arvizu

When our family first volunteered to host two students from West Africa four years ago, I wasn't really sure how it would go. We had three young children - our twins Ben and Evie were 11 and our youngest, Will, was only 7. My husband and I both work, and we are a busy family with lots of activities and commitments in our community. We weren't sure if we'd have the time or energy to be good hosts.

But, I really wanted to do this and figured that since my primary job right now is being a mom, it wouldn't be so hard to mother 2 more girls. That's how I looked at it...mothering and loving two more kids.

The reality is hosting is a little more than just loving these girls. It's being organized so they have a great experience. It's coordinating so that they get where they need to go. It's prepping meals and helping them pack their lunches. It's listening to what they need and what they're supposed to be doing. It's pushing when they're nervous to speak English. It's laughing together when we all mess up each other's language. It's the honor of hearing their stories and getting to know them. And yes, it's also the gift of getting to love them.

This experience in the US helps these amazing, brave, resilient young women see the potential in their futures, makes them even more determined to stay in school, and inspires them to make a difference in their own communities. But, the good doesn't stop with the African girls.

The American children, teens, and adults who have volunteered and gotten to know these African scholars have also been inspired. They have more gratitude for their own lives and more understanding and awareness that someone else's journey may be very different from their own.

Being able to empower these young African leaders and to see a shift in our own American teenagers toward gratitude and service has made every host-mom minute of planning, worry, and love more than worth it. We adore these young women. They are our family. They have made me recognize my own heart's capacity to love. If you believe in a ripple or butterfly effect, then you know that helping one person can change the world. Our Expanding Lives girls have already changed our world, and we can't wait to see what they'll do next.



## UPCOMING EVENTS



### GIVING TUESDAY

November 27, 2018

Give to

Expanding Lives!

[www.expandinglives.org](http://www.expandinglives.org)

### HOLIDAY GIFT WRAPPING

December 14-24 2018

Lincolnwood Mall

December 13,14,17, 21, 2018

Barnes & Noble, Old Orchard Mall

### EL HOST CHARITY BINGO

January 20, 2019

Hamburger Mary's, 7-9 pm

5400 N Clark St, Chicago



# VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT

By *Jacoba Cruz-Rodríguez*



A couple of years ago, the Chicago Women's Health Center (CWHC) received a request to support women's health and sex-education classes for Expanding Lives. New in the city and recently migrated from Puerto Rico, I started researching the project, the mission, and the objectives of these workshops in order to create classes that would fit their needs. I remember getting back to my director and saying, "Why didn't I know about this project before?! This is such a lovely and powerful social justice project." We agreed to let this new relationship flourish.

As an educator, I find it important for the students and me to talk about who we are and what it means to be us in this world. I was excited and nervous to start as I needed to understand where they were coming from. I hoped they would also understand where I was coming from, in order to have all these uncomfortable conversations about bodies, anatomy, puberty, and sex. Because yes, it can be difficult to talk about this stuff by itself, and that's okay. Imagine doing so in a third language, with a Latinx woman, in a foreign country. All my worries, however, vanished the moment we sat down at the table to talk about life, ancestors, family, feelings, fears, and hopes; about what is it to navigate this society (or Niger's or Benin's or Puerto Rico's) as a woman; and how patriarchy manifests in some different yet similar ways.

I could spend hours listening to these students. It wasn't the curriculum, it wasn't me as a teacher, it wasn't the hour or the day. It was the power of women sitting around a table to laugh about what our grandmothers told us about the menstrual period, about our parents' stories of where babies come from, to evaluate others' ideas of what we had to do or couldn't do with our bodies. It was that sense of "we belong here to this moment and this table" that connected us regardless of our country of origin, our languages, our traditions, our hair, or the colors of our skin. We were able to listen to "Despacito" while learning comfort measures to support other women while giving birth. While we were laughing together, we understood the importance of negotiating condom use with a partner and how to use it or put it on even when it would make us giggle. It was also while we cried together that we understood the importance to be present for one another when talking about sexual aggression, or sexual orientation, and identity.

Women from all over the world have sat together around tables, present for each other, and have survived doing it. We did it and we succeeded until the day we split and decided to create more tables to talk with other women. Now each group that comes to EL and meets in our class continues creating these spaces for other women to laugh, to cry, to talk, to listen, and to be together. They create theirs in their countries, and after their departures, they keep inspiring me to open more spaces to talk about all those topics that we are sometimes so scared to talk about but feel less heavy when shared around a table with the right people.

Thank you to the Expanding Lives students for transforming my life, and inspiring me to continue opening these safe spaces for all. My heart is with you all.



## CONNECT WITH US!



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