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West African immigrants seeking citizenship learn to read and write

By AMANDA FARINACCI



These women from West Africa belong to a group on Staten Island called Napela.

The word means “together,” which describes their journey that brings them here to this basement in the Park Hill housing development every Monday and Thursday night.

Chama Sesity, an immigrant from Sierra Leone says, “I want to learn something!”

Napela was founded 15 years ago by Adama Fassah, who emigrated from Liberia, to teach new arrivals how to read and write in English.

She wanted to make sure they could speak to their children’s teachers, and read notices sent home from school.

The mission expanded and now Fassah's group helps to prepare green card holders for their citizenship tests.

"My grandmother always used to say, wherever you live is your home. So learn to treat the people and the place with respect," Fassah said.

In the last 10 years, Napela has helped 25 Liberian immigrants who came here not knowing how to read and write, and gain their citizenship.

Younger Howard has been studying with the group for five years.

A green card holder, she's now preparing to take her citizenship test and hopes one day she can visit Liberia without fear of not being able to return to her new home in the U.S.

"If I have citizenship, I'll be happy to go out there any time I want; I'll be happy," Howard Said.

Wagner College professor Bernadette Ludwig sits on Napela's board of directors. Four years ago, she began inviting her students to teach the women.

Abigail Dorcin, a senior business major with no background in education began volunteering here as a freshman.

She said she's been so inspired; she has been helping to build a similar group back home in Haiti.

"They want to learn and I kind of fell in love with education, like I saw the power of education and the power of learning through them," Dorcin said.

Napela not only teaches these immigrants about American culture, it has begun teaching its youngest members about West Africa. As immigrants plant roots here, they can maintain a connection to where they came from.

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