

## **A Challenging Case By Brett Rankin**

After undergoing training as a literacy coach in the fall of 2008 I came armed to my first meeting with my new student, Peter, with notebooks, reading and writing exercises, and a few ice breaker activities. What I was not aware of was the fact that due to Peter's extremely advanced and debilitating multiple sclerosis he was nearly blind and more or less quadriplegic. Therefore, there would be no development of reading or writing skills, and certainly the aim of our weekly lessons would not be finding a job or working on independence. Our first lesson was brief, as he didn't speak a word of English and I didn't speak any Russian, so I taught him some basic greetings and had him memorize his address and phone number and a few other personal details that he might conceivably need to know in English.

I came into the RefTrans office a few times that fall in search of some resources that might be useful for a very disabled immigrant but apart from the literacy materials and exercises there wasn't a whole lot to work with. I considered asking for a reassignment but I didn't think that would be fair to Peter and his mother and so I decided to develop my own lesson plan that would parallel the sequence of the first few installments of the literacy material, but done so as to be almost completely oral. Peter communicated that his goal was basic oral communication and the ability for him and his mother to go out and if need be ask for directions, questions, etc. Since he still retained some vision- and his ability to see gets better or worse depending on his MS flare-ups- I tried printing out very large clip-art images of items, professions, and situations that he might encounter on a regular basis, such as food, furniture, medicine, and methods of travel. He could make out most of these images, which could be subsequently built on each week. We started with basic memorization, followed by some simple verbs, and then combined them to build sentences. As his skills improved, we moved on to the past and future tenses, plural vs singular, etc, to the point where now we can talk for an hour before even getting out the review material.

It's been slow-going, but Peter has made remarkable progress, especially in light of his disability. Though his grammar and vocabulary remain somewhat limited, he has gone from being unable to understand a word of English to, for instance last week, discussing music, movies, and politics for almost two hours. In addition to our weekly lessons/conversations we go on occasional field trips and build lessons around them. Over the last year we have visited the zoo, the De Young, the California Academy of Sciences, Golden Gate Park, and the Legion of Honor, and we have plans to soon visit the MOMA and the SF Symphony.

Since we began our lessons, Peter has been granted permanent resident status and now has access to social benefits such as SSI and more importantly, MediCal. I wrote him a letter of reference for his immigration hearing and helped his mother write a letter to Sen. Feinstein concerning her status, which is less certain. I have also been in contact with a former director of Refugee Transitions, Lilya, who speaks Russian and helps me and the family communicate with each other when a concept is a little too complex for us to communicate otherwise. As his language skills improve I have gotten to know Peter pretty well over the last year, and he seems happier and less isolated than when we met. There is still a LOT of progress to be made and since I'm honestly just sort of winging it, I'm not always sure what I should focus on next, and I feel sometimes that we've hit a wall. However, I'm happy to hear that RT is thriving and expanding and I'm proud to be a part of this amazing organization.