

ESOL VOICES: Student Spotlight

Fola Djimy Awlui

Fola Djimy Awlui is an ESOL student from Togo, West Africa. He has lived in the United States for two years with his cousin. After completing the ESOL Program, Fola plans to study Computer Information Systems at MCC. In this interview story, Togo writes about his friend Diego who came to the United States illegally many years ago.



Fola Djimy Awlui, 2017

A Long Pilgrimage

I have been mistaken for a Jamaican in New York several times, but not as much as by Diego. Last summer, he asked me the same question every time he had a chance to talk to me, “Where are you from?”

And a hundred times, I replied, “I’m from West Africa.”

The old man, probably a septuagenarian, is a very friendly Latino. He never hesitated to wave his hand in greeting every day when I came back from work during that season.

That black Friday, as I entered his apartment, I found myself in a sanctuary. The living room was filled with religious objects. Rosaries, statues of Virgin Mary, and other similar things decorated the space. At this sight, I took the risk to ask him if he was a Christian.

Leaning forward, the old man answered, “My wife and I are Catholics.” He also informed me that his wife had gone to New Rochelle, NY to visit their children during the holidays.

Avoiding the topic of religion, I questioned him, “What is the biggest regret of your life?”

“I did not give water to someone

who was thirsty,” he remembered after a short silence.

“The person probably found water somewhere else; you should forget about it,” I suggested.

The old man bowed his head and revealed, “But, it was in the desert crossing the border. After three days of walking, one of us fainted. Nobody had water to revive him.” He lifted his head and continued after a few seconds, “I had a bottle left in my bag, but I did not have the courage to share. They rubbed him with some alcohol and he was gone.” He paused. “I felt guilty.”

Diego left his native Guatemala when he was 21 years old. He was born in Quiché county. He attended school in his village irregularly from 11 to 19 years old, and then became a catechist in a local church. He often accompanied his father doing agricultural labor for landowners. The civil war deprived him of any hope of staying in the country. His village was caught in the war zone. The cattle had been slaughtered and some locals deported or killed. Collection and sale of firewood became the main business.

“Gradually, my desire to enter

Mexico and then to the United States grew stronger, but alone I had no chance,” he admitted. As a result, Diego contacted *polleros*.

I guessed *polleros* was somebody’s name. I therefore asked him who *polleros* was.

“*Polleros* are coyotes, like prairie dogs. That name indicates their bad reputation because you never know how far to trust them,” he explained. Then he wrapped his arms around himself and added that some have abandoned their customers in the desert, leaving them to certain death. “I did business with a coyote who asked for 12,000 Quetzals,” he told me.

“Were you not afraid to leave?” I asked him, to know how he felt when he left his village.

“I did not have the courage to say goodbye to my friends in the village. I said goodbye only to my mom and left home around nine o’clock in the morning.”

At that moment, I saw his eyes becoming wet. I thought the interview would be over. But crinkling his nose he added, “Mama replied, ‘Farewell, may everything go for the best.’”

He recalled that at the appointment with the coyote, he discovered some well-known faces among those who were going to travel. Many of them thought that as a catechist, he was there so they could say goodbye to a church member. After having paid the amount due, the coyote gave them instructions and made them get on a bus he had rented.

"All of us were very preoccupied. How would this perilous journey unfold?" he wondered.

Diego added that some were even crying, and then someone shouted, "Diego, please, make a prayer, so that everything goes well." He made them make the sign of the cross and said this prayer from his heart: "God, creator of all the universe, our creator, we ask your approval and blessing because today we are leaving to tread to other lands, lands that also belong to you. God, protect us like Abraham and the holy family. We ask for your protection so that this pilgrimage that begins today unfolds according to your holy will."

Then he concluded, "We all said Amen!"

"How were your first days in the USA?" I asked.

He gazed at the clock on his wall.

"I had completed a long two-month journey through Mexico with all its difficulties: cold, heat, rain,

pain, fear, hunger, thirst, tears, and prayers," he detailed, counting slowly on his fingers.

Diego and his fellow travelers had landed in Arizona. But once there, language and work stood as barriers. He first worked in some industrial factory 10 hours a day, for \$2 an hour, and lived in a prefabricated house. He revealed that the management did not check people's identities and added, "It's a very long story."

I didn't want to embarrass old Diego, but I was curious to know how he managed to become lawfully allowed in the US. "How did you legalize your situation in this country?"

He smiled and asked me, "Do you believe in love at first sight?"

I nodded my head yes. We look at each other's eyes a few seconds and laughed.

His life changed when on a Monday morning, he met a girl as he was entering a *bodega*.

"Susan stared at me and I stared at her. She was so beautiful! We looked at each other for almost two minutes, but I couldn't say anything to her," he said.

Since his first encounter with that girl, young Diego kept going to the convenient store. He admitted that one day he greeted her. She asked his name and told him that she was

Susan.

"Susan was an American citizen. Also, she was the daughter of the store owner. That helped me a lot!" he said with a half-smile and wide-open eyes. They naturally became very good friends since Susan's family was Catholic, too. The couple got married and are still together today.

After an hour with him in his sanctuary-like space, it was now time to leave old Diego. I thanked him for helping me with my essay. He asked me to wait, took his cane, and walked slowly into a different room. He came back holding a necklace and a religious pendant.

"May God protect you," he wished, giving me the religious set.

He opened the apartment door to let me out. The coldness outside refreshed my brain and made me think deeply about his long adventure. Diego must be very fortunate, since illegal immigration is not easily turned into lawful residency in the United States. Added to his perilous journey were certainly many appearances before immigration judges and huge lawyer fees. He could have been deported if he had not met his wife. Meeting Susan was perhaps an appointment with his destiny, or an answer to his sincere prayer the day he left his native Quiché.

ESOL Voices a collection of stories written by ESOL students at Monroe Community College. Each semester, we highlight students from different regions around the world. Look for a new story in the Tribune each month. We hope you will find these stories interesting and inspiring.

Katie Leite & Pamela Fornieri, ESOL Program, April 2018
