Getting to Know the American Dream

SUGGESTED LEARNING STRATEGIES: Marking the Text, Discussion Groups, Quickwrite

Activity 1.8

Getting to Know the American Dream

Purpose:
• To analyze aspects of the American Dream
• To summarize texts and present findings to peers
• To connect newly learned information to personal experience
• To analyze the organization of a nonfiction text

Steps:
1. Part of the American Dream is idea of hope and freedom and opportunity. Begin by reading aloud the introduction section to “They Live the Dream” by Dan Rather (a former CBS evening news anchor). Discuss Rather’s reasons for writing this essay. Number students from one to six. Assign a number to each section of the essay: Delores Kesler, Wayne Ward Ford, Shawn Carlson, Oscar Carlos Acosta, Eileen Collins, and Curtis G. Aikens, Sr.

2. Direct students to mark their text noting what each person’s dream was and how he or she accomplished it.

3. Explain to students that after they have read their section, they will share the story with others who did not read about that particular person. Jigsaw the class into groups that include one student from each of groups one through six. Each person will take a turn and tell the story he or she read. During the Jigsaw, encourage English language learners to practice aloud using appropriate connecting words such as prepositions, articles, conjunctions, and other transitions.

My Notes

Dan Rather

It is the phrase we reach for most often to describe this land of ours. It has reflected what is best in us as a country and a people. It is the American Dream, and it has filled me with awe for as long as I can remember.

Growing up in Houston during the Great Depression, it took shape for me around the radio, as I listened spellbound to Edward R. Murrow’s World War II dispatches and dreamed of becoming a reporter myself. My neighborhood was not a place that led me to think I should be reaching for such a faraway star. Yet — and this still gives me a thrill today — within 20 years, there I was, a correspondent in New York City, meeting Murrow, my childhood hero.

The American Dream, you see, holds me in its grasp because I have been blessed to live my own version of it. There is no typical American and no typical American Dream. For some, the Dream is one of freedom; for others it is of fortune or family or service to one’s fellows. Some place greatest emphasis on the pursuit of happiness or of keeping alive the innovative spirit. But however we define it, it defines us as a people.

The people you’ll meet here are the result of my quest to discover the American Dream as your neighbors are creating it today. I think you will find them inspirational. I know I did.

Delores Kesler

She started her company just to survive and retired a millionaire.

Delores Kesler’s dream began with a $10,000 loan she used to found a temporary staffing agency in Jacksonville, FL, in 1977. When she retired 20 years later, her company, AccuStaff, had projected revenues of $2 billion. Kesler says she didn’t plan to become a millionaire: Divorced and with a small child, she began her career at 22 with a series of dead-end jobs, struggling to make ends meet.

Unit 1 • The American Dream
When she founded her company, there were few women entrepreneurs. But her father had often told Kesler she could do anything she wanted to do, and she was determined to succeed. As time went on, however, Kesler realized it was not just financial gain she was pursuing: She wanted to make a contribution to her community. And, as her business grew, she started requiring her employees to devote time to community service and insisting that her company contribute to local charities. And she didn’t stop there. In time, Kesler’s company was earning $50 million a year, and a large portion was going back into the community.

When Kesler retired, she set a new course for her life. Today, the Delores Pass Kesler Foundation focuses on changing young lives through education, mentoring and children’s programs. In 1997, she gave $1 million to the University of North Florida to provide scholarships to students from Raines High School in Jacksonville. She cried before an audience of thousands when the principal thanked her. She told them that they didn’t know how good it felt to be able to give that money away. “An awful lot of people benefited from what started with a $10,000 loan,” Kesler says.

Wayne Ward Ford believes we all have a destiny – not a predetermined fate but a place that a higher power wants us to go – and he’s proof of it.

WAYNE WARD FORD
A troubled young man, he had an odd premonition about his future.

Wayne Ford was in eighth grade when a teacher asked the class to write their obituaries. How would they like to be remembered? Ford, who lived in a rough area of Washington, D.C., came up with a curious response: He said he would make his mark in the Midwest. He would be active in politics and in charge of a community center.

Wayne Ford would go on to get in trouble in high school. “I was doing drugs, robbing, breaking into apartments,” he recalls. To get away, he accepted a football scholarship to a small, nearly all-white Minnesota college. Once there, however, racism threatened to throw him off course. Instead, he turned his anger to activism and founded the school’s black student union.

“Then,” he says, “it all started to come together. The worst things in my life were the things that had the potential to make me great.” Ford devoted himself to academics. History especially gave him a new perspective. “When I started reading it,” he says, “I thought, ‘My God, the world has gone through hell, not just Wayne Ford.’”
After graduation, Ford turned to politics. Today, he’s living the dream he had as a boy: He’s the only black member of the Iowa State Legislature and the founder and executive director of Urban Dreams, a nonprofit community program for at-risk youth. Last year, he spoke before the Democratic National Convention. It was one of the biggest achievements of his life, but he says, “It wasn’t the cherry on the ice cream. The best is yet to come.”

SHAWN CARLSON

His grandfather’s struggle to be accepted inspired him to encourage others.

Shawn Carlson says his dream and his passion — the Society of Amateur Scientists, which he founded — was inspired by his grandfather. “I’ve been privileged to know some of the greatest scientists alive today,” says Carlson, who has a Ph.D. in nuclear physics. “And no one had a greater raw scientific talent than my grandfather.” But, he adds, his grandfather’s work was consistently rejected “because he didn’t have the letters ‘Ph.D.’ next to his name.”

“Amateur scientists,” he says, “are overflowing with passion,” and his aim is to teach them standards and procedures so the larger scientific world will take them seriously. He and his wife, Michelle, sank their life savings of $10,000 into starting the Society for Amateur Scientists in 1994 and endured several tough years. Then Carlson was awarded a MacArthur “genius” fellowship, which allowed him to keep the Society afloat.

Although he has been criticized by some in the scientific community, Carlson continues to pursue his dream of opening scientific innovation to everyone. “The ability to come up with something original and be respected because you are a maverick — that’s very much part of the American tradition,” he says.

OSCAR CARLOS ACOSTA

Everything he wanted was within his grasp. Then, it seemed, it was gone.

As a boy in tiny Elida, NM, Oscar Acosta had a talent for throwing a baseball that brought him a college scholarship and a chance at athletic glory. Getting to the Majors was his dream, and he neglected everything else — his schoolwork, and his wife and children — to get there. “I became consumed,” he says. He made it to the minor leagues, but when a torn rotator cuff ended his pitching career, his life spiraled out of control. His wife took the kids and left. He was broke. He lost any belief in himself. “I’d just given up,” he says. “I thought I was destined to go back and be a cow-puncher the rest of my life.”
When he got a second chance — an offer to coach in the Texas Rangers’ minor league system — Acosta says, he realized it was time to change. His identity, he swore, would never be tied exclusively to baseball. He reconciled with his wife and for the next 11 years built back what he’d lost, taking his blessings as they came. “I told my daughter, if God wants me to be a minor league instructor, that’s what I’m going to do,” he says.

Acosta did make it to the Majors — as a pitching coach for the Chicago Cubs. Now 44, he lives not far from where he grew up. Recently, Acosta watched his son play in the Little League game on the same field where he’d learned to pitch. “This was a big deal,” Acosta says. “It was like watching myself — like my life had started all over.”

EILEEN COLLINS

She found what she wanted to do in life, but how in the world would she get there?

The first woman to pilot the Space Shuttle and to command a Shuttle mission grew up in public housing in Elmira, NY. There wasn’t much money for family outings when she was a child. “One thing my father liked to do,” recalls Eileen Collins, “was take us to the airport to watch the planes take off.” She knew she wanted to fly, so Collins saved up for lessons, and she had enough by the time she attended community college. Once in the pilot’s seat, her future seemed clear: “You know how you find the thing that you like to do in life?” she says. “I found it.”

Collins pursued her dream, joining Air Force ROTC at Syracuse University and being among the first women allowed into the pilot-training program. But she didn’t stop there. Eventually, she set her sights even higher — on NASA.

She recalls an early look out the window of the Shuttle: “Looking back at Earth is just beautiful. It’s blue, it’s white, it’s tan. The jungles are a dark green. There’s so much water. It’s just amazing.” And when Collins got the opportunity to land the Shuttle — the first woman to do so — she says, “I knew all those women pilots out there were watching me and thinking, ‘Eileen, you better make a good landing.’” She did.

“I’m an explorer,” says Collins, now 44. “I want to go places that are new and different, learn new things. I think that’s what being human is all about. It’s what life is all about — exploring and learning.”
Curtis Aikens, who grew up in rural Conyers, GA, puts a face to one of those literacy statistics we hear but sometimes cannot believe: He went through high school and five semesters of college without learning how to read. One of the millions who fall through the cracks and keep falling, Aikens believes that he would have disappeared completely if he hadn’t, at 26, finally asked for help. Of his literacy tutors, Aikens says, “They didn’t change my life. They saved my life.”

Aikens put his new skills to good use. A lifelong lover of cooking and food, he started his own produce company in his hometown, became a food columnist and began to focus on his version of The American Dream: “I said to myself, I’m going to become a celebrity.” But it wasn’t fame alone he was pursuing, he explains. “It was so, when I talk about the fact that I couldn’t read, other nonreading adults will say, ‘If he can do it, I can too!’” Today, Aiken has three cookbooks to his name and appears on Calling All Cooks on the Food Network. But, he says, he hasn’t reached his goal. “I’m still trying to obtain The American Dream, because I want to give everybody the ability to read. I know that sounds hokey, but there it is.”

YOU MAY SENSE A COMMON THREAD running through many of these stories. The American Dream affords us opportunity and the freedom to seize it. It has also created, in my experience, some of the most generous people in the world. Americans who find their own dream make the dreams of their fellow citizens possible as well. For them, and for the rest of us the Dream remains both a hope and a promise, even as we add to its meaning with each new chapter of our lives.
Getting to Know the American Dream

by Mary-Beth McLaughlin

Nancy Pham says that she had been a dreamer most of her life. Her dreams have taken her from a crowded refugee boat in the choppy seas off war-torn South Vietnam to the quiet confines of a former church in suburban Toledo where she’d opened her own beauty salon.

She’s still navigating choppy seas — any entrepreneur trying to launch a new business in tough economic times knows the going isn’t easy. But she exudes a quiet confidence.

“I’m already a success, because I’ve already done what I wanted to do,” said the owner of the Fifth Avenue beauty salon, which opened three months ago at the corner of Sylvania and McCord Roads.

Such confidence is born from a lifetime of beating the odds, starting at age 13, when the Vietnam War came to the city of Saigon where she lived with her family.

Confidence also comes from having survived a 15-day boat trip with her husband and two small children, one of whom was so sick, she feared she would have to bury the child by tossing her into the sea.

And still more confidence comes from having ended up in Oak Harbor, OH, with no job or money, not speaking English, and not even being sure of the size of the United States.

Speaking in soft, accented English, Mrs. Pham retold her story quietly. Only the long pauses and heavy sighs gave away the pain of surviving during wartime. From 1963 on, there were sandbags in the living room where the family ran during bombings that occurred every night.

“I was not afraid of it. Sometimes, I would just sleep in my bed and you could feel the whole house shake. It was really, really noisy,” she said. “And then I would get up in the morning and I was not scared. I would feel wonderful I’m alive. And I would walk around the neighborhood and check and see who is alive and who is dead.”

Steps:
5. Have students independently read “Lifelong Dreamer—Vietnam Boat Person.” As they read, direct students to mark the text where Nancy Pham states her dream, where the dream is threatened, and how the dream comes into existence. An understanding of these three elements will be helpful on Embedded Assessment 2.
6. Direct students to revisit the text and use the SIFT strategy to examine the stylistic techniques used by the writer to convey her perspective on the American Dream. Lead students in a discussion of their analyses.
7. As a closing activity, ask students to consider someone they know, have seen/heard about, or even themselves and their relationship to the American Dream. In a quickwrite, ask students to identify what that person’s dream was, where the dream was threatened or blocked, and how the dream came (or is coming) into existence.
8. Ask students to share their paragraphs with the class.
But life went on and Mrs. Pham did the “normal” things: graduated from high school; learning shorthand, typing, and English, and getting a job as a secretary at Macvee II, a company associated with the U.S. Army.

She met and married Chinh, a man 11 years her elder, who was in the Navy. They had two children, Huy (renamed William) and Trang (renamed Jenny). After Jenny was born in 1973, Mrs. Pham quit Macvee to become a full-time mother.

Although it was nerve-wracking to ride on buses or go to hotels where Americans stayed — both were prime targets for bombs — the South Vietnamese people love the Americans and Saigon thrived with their presence, she said.

But in 1972, the Americans started their withdrawal, and things began to change. By 1975, with Saigon on the verge of falling, all former and current Macvee employees were promised safe passage to the U.S. if they wanted.

Mrs. Pham’s sister, still a Macvee employee, typed up the forms for the whole family to leave.

Their mother, who did not speak English, but already had moved once to escape Communism, was determined to leave. But Mrs. Pham hesitated. “I worry, what will I do over [in the U.S.]? We have money, and a business and a house, and I thought, I never did anything to the Communists, they won’t do anything to me. So I don’t go,” she said.

So while her sister, mother, and remaining family members headed for the ship in the harbor, Mrs. Pham stayed with her two small children — until her husband arrived the next day and demanded to know why they hadn’t left.

Brushing aside her arguments, he loaded the kids in the car with clothes and borrowed milk, told neighbors they would return the next day after a visit to her aunt, and set off for the harbor.

Mr. Pham ignored the restrictions on service personnel leaving the country and boarded the boat with his family.

On April 29, 1975, the ship pulled out of the harbor as the radio blared news that Ho Chi Minh was now in charge of Saigon.

Pausing while lost deep in memories, Mrs. Pham whispered, “It seems like yesterday.”

They had no idea where they were going or how long it would take to get there, she said.

There was no roof, no room to move, and canned Army rations included raw fish with a worm inside. And there was no milk for 10-month-old Jenny, so they fed her sugar and water. But as days went by, Jenny became weak until she all but stopped moving, and her mother thought she had died.
“I don’t know where I’m at. Even if there had been a coconut floating by, I would have had some idea. My husband was crying and I was running from one room to another but there was no medicine,” she said. “We were just hoping they would stop somewhere.”

“I kept thinking, ‘If she dies in the ship, we’d have to throw her in the ocean,’” Mrs. Pham said.

But in the first of what she called “miracles,” the ship carrying the Phams stopped at Subic Bay, The Philippines, after 15 days at sea.

The family boarded another ship to Guam, and eventually was sent to a camp in Pennsylvania, where they waited for a family or church to sponsor them.

Many families requested sponsors located in sunnier climates like Florida or California, but Mr. Pham couldn’t wait.

“I did not know how big the U.S. is and I was worrying about everything. I wanted to get out and see what outside world is, and so I tell my husband we have to get out and make a living,” she said.

Her mother moved to New Jersey, her sister to California, and the Pham family was sponsored by St. John Lutheran Church, in Rocky Ridge, near Oak Harbor. On July 16, 1975, the Pham family boarded a plane for Ohio.

Nancy said she was anxious, having been told Ohio was full of snow and ice and cold.

“I’m such a worrier, that I looked down, picturing snow and ice and no living thing,” she said. “I look down and everything was so green and there were mountains and rivers. I feel so happy. I feel like I’m a bird, like I’m a fish. Everything is so beautiful and I think, ‘I can make a living.’

The Phams stayed with an Oak Harbor family for two weeks, then moved when the church found a house for them to rent.

Chinh found a job at Glasstech, Inc., within two weeks, while Nancy took English lessons. But Nancy said she quickly knew that life in a rural community wasn’t for her, and started urging her husband to move the family closer to Toledo.

Eventually, Mrs. Pham borrowed money from her brother and the family bought a small house in east Toledo.

She sewed clothes for a next door neighbor, made and sold egg rolls, cleaned people’s houses, and worked as a lunchtime waitress. Along the way, she had Thomas, now 10.

But always, always she was dreaming.
“I love doing nails,” said Pham. “I could sit here all day.”

Pham said she often had to work 16 hours straight, six days a week, with only the occasional day off. "I’m a workaholic," she said. "I love doing nails."

Pham said she didn’t worry about whether her business would be a success. "I like to be my own boss and I want to treat employees fair and equal," she said. "I like to take and give. I don’t want people who only take and don’t give," she said.

This year, Mrs. Pham got to be her own boss when her husband noticed that the church at the corner of McCord and Sylvania roads was up for sale. He wanted to open a restaurant in the old church, but after Mrs. Pham convinced him that would be too much work, she broached the idea of a beauty salon.

Donna Pollex, an agent with Loss Realty Co. who handled the deal, had nothing but praise for the Phams. "They are fantastic people. They’re very dedicated and very honest and try to please people and I wish them lots of success," she said. "They just brought themselves up from nothing and I know they will be successful. The hours she puts in are incredible and it’s really a family affair. The husband does the yard and the daughter handles appointments and both sons also help out."

"They are very, very hard working people," she said.

With the help of workers, the church was remodeled into a beauty salon which opened about three months ago.

Mrs. Pham said she doesn’t worry about whether her business will be a success.
“What you want to do, you should do. You may lose money, but you do not lose what you want to do,” she said. “I don’t worry about being famous or about being rich. I just want to have a beauty salon for everyone.”

It is an attitude that sits well with her eight employees.

Madonna Fong, a hair stylist at Fifth Avenue, said she has been in the beauty business for 16 years and has worked at a lot of salons that have been "temples of egos."

"[Nancy] is very kind, very caring,” she said. “And she has such a great sense of peace in herself.”

Mrs. Pham said if she seems peaceful, it’s only because she still has dreams.

“If I stopped dreaming, that means I already died,” she said.

Mary-Beth McLaughlin is a newspaper journalist for the Toledo Blade.