

If you would just tell me a little about yourself and how you're involved with the Congolese community?

Sure, I'm Dr. Sally Cook, I'm a professor of Linguistics, especially in the area of ESL, English as a Second Language, here at Truman. And I was actually on sabbatical, and I had a project related to critical thinking and the writing of Chinese students here at Truman, and at the same time, while I was on sabbatical, I was volunteering at the public schools, just helping with the non-native speakers, and that happened to coincide with a fairly rapid influx of Congolese to the Kirksville community. So that was in the end of 2014, January 2015, so the schools were kind of ill-equipped to deal with the number of students coming in and the various needs and so I actually went to the Provost and said, "Can I redo my sabbatical proposal? So that I meet the community need, and it will be a scholarly sabbatical, I just need to change the focus." So I went through a variety of twists and turns, rewrote it, got approved, and so that really was how it all started.

When was that?

That was the end of 2014, is when they started coming in, but my sabbatical was the academic year of 2015. So, I then, did various things in terms of training and professional development, but I also realized that the teaching community, I don't know how to say this, they needed more context about who the Congolese were. And so I had actually a colleague in the Congo working for the Congolese-American Language Institute. And so he was doing a big symposium for English languages teachers. So we constructed, kind of a contract with each other, that I would come over and help him run the symposium if he could get me into the Congolese schools and give me access to those teachers, the headmasters, etc. So that's what we did. So in October, I went over, and I was there for just a little over two weeks, but it gave me enough context so that I came over and did professional development in the public schools. But I also simultaneously did an English class in one of the churches based on a request from members of the community asking me because they needed additional help. What was being offered at VoTech tended to be elementary English and some of them had progressed to the next level and didn't have any options here locally. That was a long answer.

Thank you. What did you learn while you were in the Congo?

It was my first time in Africa, so there was a learning curve on a variety of levels. I did extensive reading, etc., but I still wasn't mentally prepared for what I encountered. And so, there was just... I've lived in Malaysia, I've traveled in countries where the roads were bad, or the government isn't always functional, but this was at a different layer. And I got... once I had only been there for 24 hours, and I just decided to flip the switch in my brain, that I had no control, that I would just go with the flow, and that was good, because that's what I had to do. So things are just a little more chaotic than one might expect. And I didn't have a Western expectation, but things just don't work sometimes at all.

Right, right. How did the school systems differ?

Well one thing, and again, I only toured schools that were within like a 4 hour radius of Kinshasa, so obviously it's a big country, and I don't want to generalize beyond that, although I did meet headmasters and school teachers from all over the country because they were flown in for the symposium, but oh well. The schools had very limited facilities, and I knew that that would be the case, but it was even more dramatic than I expected. The libraries were virtually nonexistent: technology didn't exist in most of the schools I visited, except the ones that were private: and so, but it helped me understand, as I mentioned in class, they were testing the Congolese students on day one in the public schools on the computers. And I realized just what a mistake that was, because they were testing their computer skills, not their language skills. Because a lot of those kids did not have access to computers at home, or in the schools. Does that make sense?

Yes. That would be hard. So that's one of the challenges, what are the other challenges that the Congolese community faces here in Kirksville?

Oh well, we can go through, should I just start with the school? [laughter] because you can go on. In terms of the schools specifically, and the challenge is they speak French, they use French in the schools, but letting, appreciating their French in the schools was a problem. And so the schools continue I think to have a, how shall I say it, a misunderstanding or a lack of appreciation for what they're bringing in. So getting the school system to build on what they bring in hasn't been automatic. I guess that's the most politically correct way to say that. And so that was a challenge. A lot of them came in at the highschool level, and I think a lot of the challenges were most dramatic at the highschool level. So you have 16 year old kids with limited English, teachers not trained to make accommodations, the school system only having one ESL teacher who doesn't speak French, a lack of French in the community in general, and so lots of things. The first year was pretty rough. We still encounter problems. I was just over in the school system now and things are must better but there are still lapses that are taking place in the schools.

So they started to come in 2014?

Well I was aware of it, it might've started before then, but that was when I became aware of it.

It sounds like the Kirksville community has adapted to having this new community?

The schools, I can only, I hate to speak for the rest of the community. The schools have made concerted efforts. So now they have a translator in each school. That was a big deal because notes are now being translated so when the parents get them, they now know what's going on in the schools. We've done a better job with parent teacher conferences, etc. And Truman gets a lot

of credit, the French department, you know, several of those individuals have stepped up to the plate and been helpful, but there are still big holes in terms of what can be done with limited funds. And when you have volunteers, it changes what is doable. So the translators are now paid, which is good, they show up, it's a job.

So much better than working in the meat plant.

Yes. So two of them are Truman students. And two are, one's a Congolese, and I think the other's from French speaking Africa, I think Togo or somewhere else.

Alright, I asked about the obstacles... I guess what are your hopes for the Congolese community?

Oh, well, in the school system I'd like to see more integration, and I talked about that in class, but many of them would like to do after school programs, but they just don't have transportation so they get eliminated from that and that's when you make friends, and get invited to birthday parties and that has not been, many people, they don't have that as an option. So the minute they get on the bus and go home, they stop speaking English, and having American friends, and that's something I'd like to see happen, but it's complicated. You'd have to have another bus come at 5, that's expensive, the school isn't going to do that.

Right. Is there anything else you'd like to talk about?

I guess, no, I'm optimistic, and I don't know what the migration patterns will be, if it will continue. It's forever-changing so if people leave the community but if new ones come in, and that's also been a challenge for the schools because, and they don't know in advance who's coming or who's leaving, so some folks are moving to Milan now, they didn't initially live in Milan, they almost all lived in Kirksville and then commuted, and so that dynamic is changing. So you kind of get a level of stability, and then there's a change, and that's what's going to continue for a long time.

What do you think are some of the factors that pull people into Kirksville and what are some factors that make them leave?

Well I think the commute was an issue. Obviously there have been bad accidents, and it's a twisty road from here to Milan. I think Richard originally came to Kirksville for a variety of reasons but one was that Truman was here, and he saw that there was a community with a college who would provide more support in a variety of ways and also I think, and I don't have access to the full story here, but the churches available here have also been a factor. And now Kraft is expanding its facility and hiring more Congolese so that's, instead of driving to Milan, several of them are now working at Kraft which is just down the road.

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COPLAC Cultural Crossroads Course

That's huge.

I mean I could go on, but I think that's the nuts and bolts of it.

Short and sweet.