

So just, tell me about yourself. How are you involved with the Congolese Community?

My name's Megan Kraus, and I am the president of a club, United Speakers, here at Truman University's campus, and I got involved with the Congolese population my Freshman year, two years ago, when I first joined United Speakers. And actually there was an email that went out before the club actually really started its year, and it said, "We're looking for people to go to Milan," which is a town about 45 minutes away from here, and I thought "Well, I'm not doing anything, might as well go." And immediately, I was drawn into teaching ESL, because it's something that I'd wanted to do, but it's a lot different when you're actually doing it and when you actually have that audience of people who want to learn English, and so ever since then, I have been going to Milan for almost every week, .. and I also was set up with a Congolese family through my French teacher Dr. [REDACTED] and she was in contact with one family who was looking for a Truman student to maybe do a language exchange so I would teach them English and they would help me with my French. So I went over there not knowing what to expect, and I found out that they were at about level zero with their English and so I just started teaching them English. And ever since then, I've been going over about every week twice a week, and I've really been able to get to know them and get to know a lot of the community through them and I've also been working in the public schools with some of the ELLs, so in the high school, I worked in the high school last year, in the ELL study hall, and I help a lot of them with subjects like history and math and then also help them practice their English through that. And this year, I'm also at the middle school, following a student around and helping her in three of her classes. And so through that, I've kind of been able to get to know the community a little better, I've been able to meet a lot of people and hear a lot about their experiences and help them as best I can.

That's awesome. So why do you think, first of all, who are the Congolese? Describe them and their community a little bit.

So the Congolese population came to Kirksville through something called the Diversity Lottery visa. And what this is is a visa given out by the US government to people who, from countries who don't usually immigrate to the United States. The system is a lottery, so once people have graduated high school and they've turned 18, they're able to enter their name in this lottery, and if they get chosen, they get a visa to come to the United States. It's a little bit different than having refugee status because with the Diversity Visa, you get the visa, but you don't really get any assistance, so that's one of the major problems that we've been having in Kirksville, is that we don't really have the assistance needed to help integrate these people, and a lot of people ask why this massive population of Congolese people ended up in Kirksville, Missouri. I can't answer that personally, but I have heard from some people that it just started with one family who did some research and found out about this place called Kirksville where there was a decent school system and where there was a meat processing plant nearby where they could work. And they moved to Kirksville, told somebody they knew that they knew moved to Kirksville, and that family knew someone else who moved to Kirksville and it kind of just ended up in a domino

effect like that. 4:09 In the end, we have about 600 Congolese people living in Kirksville, but in addition we also have people from a few different countries like Haiti, Republic of Congo, which is a little bit different than Democratic Republic of the Congo, it's a different country even though they're both referred to as Congolese, and I even met someone from Eritrea once.

Even among the Congolese, it's not homogenous.

And also within the Congolese, within the people from the Democratic Republic of Congo, there's a lot of different groups I guess. Most of them, it sounds like, came from Kinshasa, which is the main city, but in the DRC there are various different groups of people from various cultures who speak different languages and I have heard that sometimes there have been some clashes with some people but overall I haven't really seen much of a problem with it.

What are some obstacles that the people from the DR Congo encounter here?

A lot of it, from my perspective, is based on their lack of English proficiency. A lot of them speak French, but they also speak native languages like Lingala, Kikongo, but since they don't have that English proficiency, it's very hard to get a job, especially one that they want. A lot of them, when they were in their country, studied things like electricity and nursing and they were science teachers and doctors, and it was really hard for them to come here and find themselves working in a meat processing plant for twelve hours a day, six days a week, because they don't have the English skills or even the time or finances to go back to school, get the United States equivalent of their degree, and find a job in that field. Also, the language has just kind of caused some miscommunication between, in like the housing industries and even just going to Wal-Mart there's sometimes problems, especially when they want to return things, so that's just kind of the base of some of their problems. I know that there's a lot more, but...

Sure. And what, how do you think that both you as an individual and us as a community can like help the Congolese to navigate these obstacles?

So one of the best things that we can do is just be patient and understanding, I was talking to one member of the Congolese community who was very frustrated because when she tried to speak English at work, everyone said, "I don't understand you, I don't understand you," and whereas I don't know how that specific situation went, I think it's just good overall to remember to have an open mind and to know that these people are trying very hard even though they might not be completely fluent in English, like they're still very intelligent, educated human beings.

Have you seen a noticeable impact on the Kirksville community because of the Congolese or vica versa?

I actually didn't start going to Truman until this influx of Congolese people was already here and was already coming in, so I didn't really know much about Kirksville before, but from what I've

heard from professors is that there's definitely a lot more diversity in Kirksville now. I know some of the businesses in town are facing different challenges that they're trying to meet when they're trying to communicate with these people and explain how things work in our country versus how things work in their country. But overall, I'm really glad that I came here, because there's so much culture now in this town that seems like it's in the middle of Missouri, what else is going to be there? We have a Wal-Mart, that's great, but it's really cool to come to the middle of Missouri and learn a little bit about Africa and try African foods and meet African people and just learn a lot about different cultures.

Do you have anything else that you would like to add, or, anything to the interview?

Not that I can think of. Do you have anymore questions?

I don't have anymore questions I guess, trying to think, it's hard sometimes. I don't know, I think it's been a really great interview, thank you so much for doing this.