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**A Teacher Who Helps the Many Become One**  
By Sol Hurwitz

Suzanna McNamara has backpacked in Patagonia and worked at a Wyoming hunting camp and aboard a trawler in the Bering Sea. But she has found the ultimate challenge at a new alternative high school in the Bronx, where she is teaching English to teenage immigrants.

Ms. McNamara is a literacy teacher at Bronx International High School, a public school for newcomers to the United States who are learning English for the first time. The school's 144 ninth- and 10th-grade students come from 30 countries in Africa, Latin America, Asia and Eastern Europe and speak 22 different languages. Most are refugees whose education has been upset by wars, family upheaval or economic turmoil.

Ms. McNamara, 29, said that a stint tutoring Spanish-speaking inmates in a New Mexico prison opened her eyes "to the plight of people who are marginalized by language problems" and inspired her to pursue her current career.

She joined Bronx International's faculty early last year, attracted by "the newness and smallness" of the school and by the challenge of teaching teenagers who are often illiterate in their native language.

"You don't take a job like this knowing it's a piece of cake," she said. "I could have taught on Long Island for a lot more money where things would be easier. Everybody here has a mountain to climb."

Bronx International is one of four high schools created within Morris High School, a Gothic revival landmark in the borough's Morrisania section. The new school opened in 2001 with 75 ninth graders and is adding a grade each year; it will become a four-year high school with 300 students in 2004. Morris will be phased out as part of a citywide initiative to transform large comprehensive high schools into smaller schools intended to raise academic achievement.

Bronx International receives more than \$200,000 in annual grants from private foundations and nonprofit school reform organizations, and maintains partnerships with the International Rescue Committee, a New York-based refugee relief organization, and the Bronx Museum of the Arts.

Since there is no template for teaching English to older students who lack native-language literacy, Ms. McNamara is creating her own curriculum.

"Students acquire English when they are forced to use it in an authentic way -- to fill some kind of information gap," she said. "I start by asking them to interview their classmates. Then they write out their replies and read them to the class: 'You're from this country, you're from that country; you're this religion, you're that religion.' It's a way to discover the differences and the connections they share."

"Connections," in fact, is the unifying theme of her evolving curriculum. Her classroom, which doubles as a computer lab, includes brightly colored posters asking: "Who are the people connected to you?" and "How do connections change us?"

Showing how strangers become friends, she offered her students a true story from O, Oprah Winfrey's magazine, about Beverly, a white woman from New Mexico, who was moved to correspond by e-mail with Adelina, a black woman from South Africa, after reading that Adelina's husband had been dragged behind a pickup truck and murdered by his white boss.

Ms. McNamara also showed a television segment from "The Oprah Winfrey Show" in which the two women meet.

"What followed," she said, "was rich journal writing and a discussion about racism, culminating in the students' writing letters to the two women. Some had never written a letter before."

Ms. McNamara knew she had succeeded when Haja Sidibey, a ninth grader from Sierra Leone who had often resisted writing, worked before and after school on a letter to Adelina, which revealed her own father's murder by rebel forces during Sierra Leone's civil war. "Now we are fine," Haja wrote. "But we always think of him."

Ms. McNamara was raised in suburban Middletown, N.J., by middle-class parents: her father worked for J. P. Morgan Chase; her mother is a nurse. She received a bachelor's degree in psychology from the University of Pennsylvania and a master's degree from Queens College in applied linguistics and teaching English as a second language.

Shael Polakow-Suransky, 31, Bronx International's founding principal, hopes the school's approach to language development will become a national model. "Our kids come to us with dramatically different levels of English literacy and academic achievement," he said. The school's goal, he said, is to prepare all the students "to be independent learners who will succeed in college."

Ms. McNamara teaches three 70-minute classes a day: two intensive English literacy classes with eight students each and, paired with another teacher, a math class of 24 students.

She tutors students in phonics three times a week before school and works one-on-one with students after school. She is part of a team that teaches English, global studies, science and math courses in which English is spoken, written and read. She often shadows their classes to identify strategies that will strengthen her students' achievement in those subjects. Some days she eats lunch as late as 3 p.m.

Ms. McNamara, who once sold her own ink-and-watercolor sketches as a street vendor in Brooklyn, helped students create a mural for the school's fourth-floor corridor with ceramic tiles depicting such themes as community, family and peace.

"It's an opportunity to define our space as a new school in a building shared by others," she said. Ms. McNamara admits that creating a new curriculum for her students is "a work in progress." But she leaves no doubt about her commitment. She is constantly studying the latest research, taking after-school and weekend courses, and visiting other schools to gain new insights. "I'm obsessed," she says with a laugh. "I'm always thinking about school. Everything I watch, everything I read, I'm, like, wow, I can use that."

Her students are also her teachers, she says. "They've taught me about their lives, their countries and their dreams. I feel a special connection to them."