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Program helps small district address shortage Damon ISD Filipino teachers

By SUSAN AVERA HOLT West Brazos Weekly
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Damon ISD Board President Helen Noble decorates the teacher workroom Friday

Photo by Susan Avera Holt

DAMON — One spam email in David Hayward's inbox hit its mark.

Rather than trashing the message, Damon ISD's superintendent opened and read the sales pitch. The premise was simple: Schools in the U.S. can hire teachers from other countries. The company, in this case, International Expert Resources, works out the technicalities and legalities.

After researching the company, Hayward was convinced the program was the answer to one of his most pressing problems — hiring teachers.

Damon is a tiny, rural district with cash-flow problems. When Hayward took over the job in January 2019, the district was on the verge of a Texas Education Agency takeover, posting an “F” academic rating. During his first week on the job, Hayward realized Damon also had a financial problem. He quickly fired the business manager, made a sobering visit to the bank and learned the district would have to take out a loan to make payroll.

“We lost a lot of students,” Board president Helen Noble said. “The community lost faith in the school system. We had more teachers leaving than staying, and we couldn’t afford to hire anyone.”

Hayward realized hiring teachers through the exchange program was a novel answer to Damon’s teacher shortage. His pressing questions: How many teachers can we get? How quickly can they get here?

THREE BLESSINGS

Hyacinth Bayabaya. Juliet Bortikey. Kristine Barbosa. Damon’s three blessings.

Bayabaya arrived in the U.S. on Aug. 14, 2021, with her husband Ernesto and 5-year-old daughter Zanna. The family is originally from the Philippines. Bayabaya taught in Thailand through the exchange program.

“I was really scared at first,” she said. She knew her profession. She knew the language, but she didn’t know about teaching English Language Arts to third, fourth and fifth graders in a tiny, rural school in south Texas.

When Noble met her at the airport, Bayabaya relaxed.

“Helen is very loving. Mr. Hayward makes us feel welcome, and he leads by example. They all treat us as family,” she said.

Bortikey came to the U.S. alone. Her husband and four children stayed in the Philippines. She heard stories from other exchange teachers who were pretty much on their own when they moved to the U.S. so she was nervous.

“They picked us up at the airport. Some don’t,” she said. “They protected us and welcomed us here.”

Bortikey teaches sixth-, seventh- and eighth-grade math.

Barbosa also came alone from the Philippines. Her husband stayed behind. She teaches third-through eighth-grade science.

After meeting Noble at the airport, Barbosa said, “I thought, ‘Is this real?’ There is such a sense of belonging.”

That initial encounter at the airport proved genuine and long-lasting, and all three ladies and their students flourished. The school board helped Damon’s newest teachers with housing and furnishings, and Noble gave them advice about car buying.

CULTURAL EXCHANGE

During their first year of teaching in the U.S., the ladies learned a lot about the differences in cultures.

“In the Philippines, if you have a problem with discipline, you’re on your own,” Bortikey said. “Here it’s the opposite. Mr. Hayward looks tough, but he is very soft with the kids, and the kids show so much respect to him.”

In March, the three ladies teamed up to present a cultural program introducing their students and coworkers to the food and some of the traditions of the Philippines.

We were very scared that the teachers wouldn’t like the food, but it was gone,” Bayabaya said.

Under the terms of the exchange program, the ladies are under contract to work in Damon for three years. They can stay in the U.S. for a maximum of five years unless their visa is waived or changed.