



Student Spotlight
Ekaterina L., *ESOL Student*
Hartford Literacy Center

Four years ago, Ekaterina (or Kate, as her friends call her) was preparing to begin a career as a dentist in her home country of Russia. But she couldn't forget the months she had spent, several years earlier, as an exchange student in the United States. She'd loved her time in America, and dreamed of returning. So Kate made the brave decision to say goodbye to her family in Russia, pack up her belongings, and begin a new adventure in the U.S.

Kate soon discovered that, due to differences in dental training requirements between Russia and the U.S., she would need to complete two additional years of residency before she would be allowed to practice dentistry in her adopted country. She also learned that she would have to earn a good score on the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) exam in order to gain acceptance to a residency program. While she found a community among other Russian immigrants in Hartford, she quickly realized that in order to complete her training and begin her career here, she would need to improve her English skills.

"Because I would go to a Russian grocery store, and I had a Russian-speaking roommate, I did not have the opportunity to practice English very often," she says. While she knew some English, she didn't feel comfortable making small talk – a key skill for dentists! – and was still unfamiliar with many of the cultural differences between the two countries.

"It broadened my mind."

It would have been easy for Kate to become discouraged at the challenges before her, but she faced them with enthusiasm and determination. "I really do not mind having to do the extra work," she says. "The culture is different, the insurance system is different, the way people communicate is different. I wanted to learn these things so that I could become a better dentist." A friend told her about LVGH, and she immediately came into the Hartford Literacy Center to sign up for classes.

"Coming here has been more than just studying English," Kate says. "I received so much support from the tutors and the other students. I made new friends. I learned about American traditions and culture. It broadened my mind." She also says that her tutor, Carol, went way above and beyond. "She started a conversation class just to help students like me get more speaking practice. She helped me learn how to write emails the way that Americans do. She did mock interviews with me to help prepare for my residency interviews. It would have been a nightmare to go through those interviews without Carol's help."

After about a year of taking English classes with LVGH, Kate took and passed the TOEFL exam with flying colors, and can now continue with her dental training. She is now interning as a dental hygienist and applying to residency programs. "The English classes at LVGH made this possible," Kate says. "I am excited for my future in America."