

YOUR AMERICAN DREAM

To The Teachers:

Two years ago, my wife, Lilly, and I established the Merage Foundation for the American Dream. We believe its mission is important to the nation and its citizens. The Foundation is dedicated to promoting expanded opportunities for immigrants. It hopes to inspire young immigrants to achieve their American Dream. It hopes to help promising immigrant leaders contribute to their communities and to the nation. It hopes to encourage Americans to understand and celebrate the contributions of immigrants to America.

The Foundation's initiatives include:

- The development of award-winning DVDs and educational materials (The American Experience) concerning the history of immigration and the lives of successful American immigrants for use in high schools throughout the nation.
- The provision of stipends and the creation of a Merage Fellows program for outstanding graduating immigrant students nominated by 22 universities throughout the country.
- The development of occasional papers and the convening of Forums concerning the impact of immigration on America and issues concerning immigration.

We are delighted that you want to use the DVDs and educational materials in your classrooms. Paraphrasing Ralph Waldo Emerson, the famous American author, the Merage Foundation hopes that the American Dream Experience will help students walk with their feet, work with their hands, speak their own minds and reach their own aspirations.

Paul Merage
President

To The Teachers:

The Merage Foundation for the American Dream is pleased to send you DVDs and related educational materials for The American Dream Experience. Both describe in vivid terms the history of immigration to America and the lives and contributions of living American immigrants. Both reflect an effort by the Merage Foundation to create a library of DVDs and educational materials for high school teachers and principals throughout the U.S. Based on use of both in over 1200 classrooms last year, the Foundation believes that the American Dream Experience will inspire students—including immigrant students and students from immigrant families—to define and achieve their American Dreams.

We hope that teachers will incorporate the DVDs and educational materials in their lesson plans over a period of several weeks. We encourage teachers to invite local immigrant leaders to watch the DVDs and discuss their content with students. We urge teachers to involve all students, whether immigrants or not, in the planned activities related to the DVDs. Students, if they are not immigrants or children of immigrant families, are likely to be able to trace their roots back to immigrant grandparents, great-grandparents or great-great-grandparents. The Foundation welcomes teacher feedback concerning the impact of the American Dream Experience in the classroom.

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THE AMERICAN DREAM EXPERIENCE

THE MERAGE FELLOWS: AMERICA'S BRIGHT FUTURE

The Merage Foundation for the American Dream awards fellowships to outstanding graduating immigrant university students. We are proud to present the real-life stories of four of our recent Fellows. Each has overcome formidable obstacles in hopes of achieving his or her American Dream. Their stories are inspiring.

One escaped a bloody civil war in El Salvador, and then survived a treacherous journey across the U.S.-Mexico border. Another fled Nigeria because his father, even on a professor's salary, couldn't afford to support his family in Africa. A third came with her parents from Hong Kong because they feared losing their freedoms under communist rule when the colony was returned to China. A fourth left his family behind in Lebanon at the age of 17, and then worked two jobs to put himself through college.

Each immigrant's story is impressive in its own way. Taken together, they demonstrate that America remains a land of opportunity, a place of promise where dreams do come true every day—a country where hard work and dedication translate into a better life. These young people are a glimpse into the future of America, and it is a bright future indeed.

BACKGROUND

EL SALVADOR

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, there were just over two million Central-American-born residents in the United States in 2000; of these, just over 40 percent (817,336) came from El Salvador.



Immigration to the United States from El Salvador was not reported separately until 1932, and averaged less than 3,000 persons per year up until 1980. But a vicious 12-year civil war, in which more than 70,000 people were killed, prompted a dramatic increase in immigration to the U.S. Indeed, since the war started, more than half a million Salvadorans have immigrated legally to the U.S. They continue to arrive at a rate of about 30,000 per year. Many undocumented El Salvadorans have come to the U.S. Their journey is often difficult. Some must first travel over land through Guatemala and Mexico before arriving in the United States, and they face a

Since the war started, more than half a million Salvadorans have immigrated legally to the U.S.

number of hardships during their journey.

An estimated 298,000 unauthorized Salvadoran immigrants were living in the U.S. in 1990, according to the Immigration and Naturalization Service. But the brutality of El Salvador's civil war eventually led the U.S. government to grant temporary protected status to hundreds of thousands of Salvadorans who had fled violence, hurricanes, and earthquakes in their homeland. As a result, the number of undocumented Salvadoran immigrants dropped over the next 10 years to 189,000 in 2000.

NIGERIA

The first African immigrants to America arrived as slaves. Some 427,000 slaves were kidnapped from Africa, usually from the coastal stretch of West Africa between the Senegal and Congo Rivers.

The greatest period of forced African immigration to the U.S. was between 1721 and 1820—ironically, this was the period known as the Enlightenment—during which 60 percent of all slaves were transported to the Western hemisphere.



During the last half of the 20th century, migration from Africa to United States changed dramatically. The number of immigrants from Africa has doubled each decade since the 1950s, when just 14,092 immigrants arrived over the 10-year period. By contrast, in 2004 alone, more than 62,000 Africans migrated to the United States. More than half of the African-born population in the U.S. arrived between 1990 and 2000.

Between 1990 and 2000, the number of African-born persons in the U.S. increased by 142 percent to 881,300. Over that same period, the number of immigrants from Western Africa (Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, St Helena, and Togo) tripled. In 2000, Nigeria was the country of birth for the greatest number of African-born residents: 134,090, or 15 percent of all African immigrants, hailed from Nigeria.

According to the Migration Policy Institute, most immigrants from Nigeria are well-educated (85 percent are high school graduates and 59 percent are college-educated) and employed (78 percent are in the labor force).

African-born residents are much more likely than immigrants from other countries to work in management or professional occupations. They therefore generally have higher median earnings than other immi-

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grants. However, they are less likely than other foreign-born residents to become citizens and less likely to own their own home. Just a third of African immigrants are naturalized citizens, compared to 40 percent of the total foreign-born population. In addition, 55 percent of African-born are men, compared with 50 percent of the foreign-born population in general.

More than a century after slavery was outlawed, blacks, including Nigerian immigrants continue to face far greater barriers to integration into mainstream society than other groups. Despite the fact that black Africans, again including Nigerians, seem to fare relatively well when compared to black Americans, more than 40 years after the civil rights movement of the 1960s, discrimination against blacks, whether native born or immigrants, continues to reduce housing, education and job opportunities.

HONG KONG

Chinese immigrants have been coming to America in large numbers ever since the California Gold rush of the 1850s. Many were merchants and artisans fleeing economic and political woes in large cities like Shanghai and Hong Kong. In



America, they worked digging mines, building railroads, or running restaurants, laundries, grocery stores, and other small businesses.

Amid an increasing tide of racist violence against Chinese immigrants, Congress in 1882 passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which remained in force for 61 years. The first law to specifically prohibit a class of immigrants based on ethnicity, it virtually barred all Chinese immigration except for the wealthy and well-educated. The 100,000 Chinese who were already in the United States were forbidden from attaining citizenship or owning land. There was even a law that revoked the U.S. citizenship of American women upon marrying a Chinese man.

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The Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed in 1943, but other barriers to Chinese immigration remained in place until the Immigration and Naturalization Amendments of 1965. That law lifted strict numerical quotas on immigrants from Asia that had been established in 1924, opening the doors to a new generation of immigrants. During the 1970s, nearly 125,000 Chinese immigrated to America—the largest number since the 1870s. The figure nearly tripled in the 1980s and rose again in the 1990s to nearly half a million. In all, the United States has welcomed 1.5 million Chinese immigrants since 1820—1.1 million of them since 1965.

At the end of the First Opium War, China ceded the strategic port of Hong Kong Island to Great Britain under the Treaty of Nanking (1842). The British expanded their holdings to the mainland Kowloon Peninsula in 1860 and to the surrounding New Territories in 1898. At the same time, it executed a 99-year-lease on the entire colony, which collectively became known as Hong Kong. On July 1, 1997, the colony returned to Chinese rule, but its character remained much more capitalist and Western than many people had anticipated. Official symbols like flags and banknotes were altered, but much remains unchanged from the days of British rule. Hong Kong has freer trade and more political freedom than mainland China and continues to negotiate many of its own treaties.

Immigrants from Hong Kong were too few to be counted separately until the 1950s, when 15,000 persons migrated to the U.S. Between 1960 and 2000, an average of 10,000 immigrants per year arrived from Hong Kong; since 2003, immigrants from Hong Kong have averaged closer to 5,000 per year. Since 1820, more than 440,000 people have emigrated to the U.S. from Hong Kong, 95 percent of them since 1960.

LEBANON

There were 440,279 persons of Lebanese ancestry in the U.S. in 2000, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. That's up from 394,180 in 1990, an increase of 10.3 percent. Meanwhile, the overall Arab population in the U.S. skyrocketed by 38.3 percent over that same period. Still, nearly 40 percent of the 3.5 million Arab-Americans in the U.S. are from



Lebanon, more than any other Arab country.

Civil war broke out in Lebanon in 1975, and came to involve Palestinian, Israeli, Syrian, and international forces over a 15-year period. Doubtless thousands of Lebanese and other Arab immigrants fled to the U.S. during this period to escape the conflict.

It is often assumed that immigration from Arab countries decreased after 9/11. But the numbers of Arabs admitted as immigrants and becoming permanent legal residents have changed little since 2001, except for a temporary drop in 2003.

What has fallen dramatically since 9/11 is the number of nonimmigrant visas issued to students, tourists, and temporary workers visiting the United States. New security measures required by the PATRIOT Act have reduced tourist and student visas by more than 50 percent for Egyptian visitors and by more than 65 percent for students and tourists from countries in the Persian Gulf. The number of visas issued to Lebanese students dropped 31 percent between 2000 and 2004, while Lebanese tourist visas fell 22.5 percent.

Lebanese immigrants are more likely than other Arabs to stay in the United States and become citizens. Just 12 percent of Lebanese-born residents were not citizens in 2000, compared with 45 percent for Moroccans or Iraqis, according to the Census Bureau. In 2005, an all-time high of more than 50,000 people from Arabic-speaking countries became legal permanent residents, or nearly twice as many as in 1999. Since 1995, an average of nearly 4,000 Lebanese-born residents of the U.S. have become legal permanent residents annually, with little change since 2001.

CLASS DISCUSSION PROMPTS

The Merage Foundation assumes that teachers will view this DVD and read the related materials as part of their development of lesson plans. Before teachers show the DVD and begin the planned activities, they should:

1. Talk about the current national debate over the role of immigrants—both legal and illegal—in the U.S. (Please see section on resources below.)
2. Review with students the important events in the lives of the four Merage Fellows shown in the video. Each overcame economic hardship, unfamiliar surroundings, and a complex language barrier to achieve the American Dream. A synopsis of each immigrant's story follows below.
3. Help students understand the significance and meaning of terms referred to in the video, including: El Salvador; 1986 Amnesty; Coachella Valley; African Slaves, Racism, Discrimination; Nigeria; PH.D; Nigerian Attire; Hong Kong; Chinese Exclusion Act; Immigration and Naturalization Amendments of 1965; Lebanon; Patriot Act; Support Network; National Institutes of Health
4. Ask students if they can define their American Dreams. If it is difficult for students to do so, teachers should ask students about their hopes concerning their education, jobs, career, marriage, children, family, and contributions to community. Teachers should encourage students to think about and develop their American Dreams as they continue their education. Teachers should ask students to compare their own American Dreams with the dreams of the Fellows from the video.

Vilma Palma

FIRST IN HER FAMILY TO GO TO COLLEGE

In 1985, when Vilma Palma was just seven months old, her mother fled El Salvador because she couldn't find any jobs in her homeland. She gained her permanent U.S. resident status after the 1986 amnesty (which allowed undocumented aliens already living in the U.S. to become citizens) and petitioned for visas to allow Vilma and her sisters to join her in the United States. But after waiting for years without a response, she decided to go back to El Salvador and bring her daughters across the border illegally.

In 1994, Vilma and her sisters began a “planes, trains, and automobiles” journey from their home in El Salvador through Guatemala and Mexico. They paid smugglers to get them to Tijuana, riding at times on a plywood platform under the bed of a pickup truck, just inches from the freeway below them. “I don't think I was scared,” she says. “I just wanted to reach the final destination.” From Tijuana, they walked along the beach for three hours until they reached San Diego, then made their way to the home their mother had set up in the Coachella Valley (located east of Los Angeles)

The Coachella Valley is an area with many other Spanish-speaking immigrants. This was a boon to Vilma, who spoke no more than 10 words of English when she arrived. “I had to catch up all the time,” she says. But after two years of intensive English classes, she became fluent enough to attend regular classes at her school. Vilma continued to speak Spanish at home with her family while

she improved her English at school. Her mother forbade her from working because she wanted Vilma to focus on her studies.

Less than 10 years after arriving in the U.S., Vilma became the first member of her family to attend college. Vilma became a citizen in 2005, and in the fall of 2006, she entered UCLA law school, where she plans to pursue her American dream of becoming an immigration attorney. She hopes to create a resource center in the Coachella Valley that will help more recent immigrants pursue their own American dreams.

“My family was taken advantage of because of their immigrant status and because they do not speak English,” Vilma says. It's not uncommon for immigrants to pay high sums of money for services that could be provided by anyone with a basic knowledge of English and immigration regulations.



Vilma (three years old) and her aunt Angelica during a soccer tournament in Jayaque, El Salvador.



UC Irvine graduation, June 17, 2006. (L-R) Vilma, mother Blanca, uncle Juan, nephew Josue, grandma Juanita, niece Jackie and oldest sister Blanca.

Felix Akinbote

TRY TO FIT IN, BUT DON'T LOSE YOURSELF IN THE PROCESS

Oluwamuye (Felix) Akinbote's father came to the U.S. from his homeland of Nigeria to pursue a higher education. When he returned to Nigeria, he discovered that he couldn't support his family even though he was a professor with a PhD. So he packed up his wife and kids and they all moved to the United States in 1992.

The Akinbotes struggled at first to find a place to call home. They lived briefly in New Jersey, and then Washington, D.C. before settling in Atlanta, Georgia. Because they moved so frequently, they had a hard time meeting other people. Finally, they found a Catholic church near their home, where they met other people with similar backgrounds and interests.

Felix and his brother learned English quickly, though their friends say it was hard to understand their Nigerian accents at first. They assimilated more quickly than their parents did. "My parents still today eat traditional African foods, but me and my brother completely switched over to pizza every other day and tacos," he says. "I don't remember the last time I ate traditional Nigerian food."

"In high school, you are trying to be just like everyone else," says Akinbote. It wasn't until he reached college that he felt comfortable embracing his "Nigerian-ness." He joined an African student club whose goal was to educate other students about Africans. Akinbote



Felix (far right) with (L-R) brother Jude Akinbote, aunt Kate Akinbote, and mother Serah Akinbote at his high school graduation.

was surprised to realize how many people in the U.S. thought all Africans lived in huts. "It was fun to be able to show people what Africans are really like," he says.

Today, Akinbote is as proud of his Nigerian heritage as is his mother. She continues to dress in traditional Nigerian attire at special events and ceremonies like graduations. "We Nigerians are kind of bold," Akinbote says. "We don't hide it."

Akinbote was accepted at Loyola Medical School in Chicago, where he plans to continue his American dream of becoming a physician. He is interested in becoming a pediatrician or a surgeon, with a specialty in infectious diseases. He is particularly concerned about the lack of doctors in urban areas and the unavailability of primary healthcare for many Americans.

"Our country has no excuse, even in inner-city community hospitals, for problems such as low physician to patient ratios," he says. "All Americans should have quality healthcare available to them." He also hopes to become a mentor for future generations of African kids.



Felix (third from left) and his mother (seated second from right) with family friends in Nigeria.

Clara Shih

HARD WORK AND STRONG ETHICS MAKE DREAMS COME TRUE

Clara Shih and her family lived in Hong Kong while it was under British rule. Concerned that they would lose many of their freedoms when the colony was returned to communist China, they applied for immigration to the United States in 1986. They didn't have much money, didn't have jobs lined up, and didn't speak English very well. But they knew one family friend in Ohio and settled there.

The first few years were difficult, as the Shihs struggled to earn a living, learn English, and make friends. At one point, Clara's father returned to Hong Kong for a year because he could not find a job in the U.S.

Clara and her brother were placed in regular classes at school, where they were often teased for their accents. But Clara's mother constantly reminded them that "hard work and strong ethics make dreams come true."

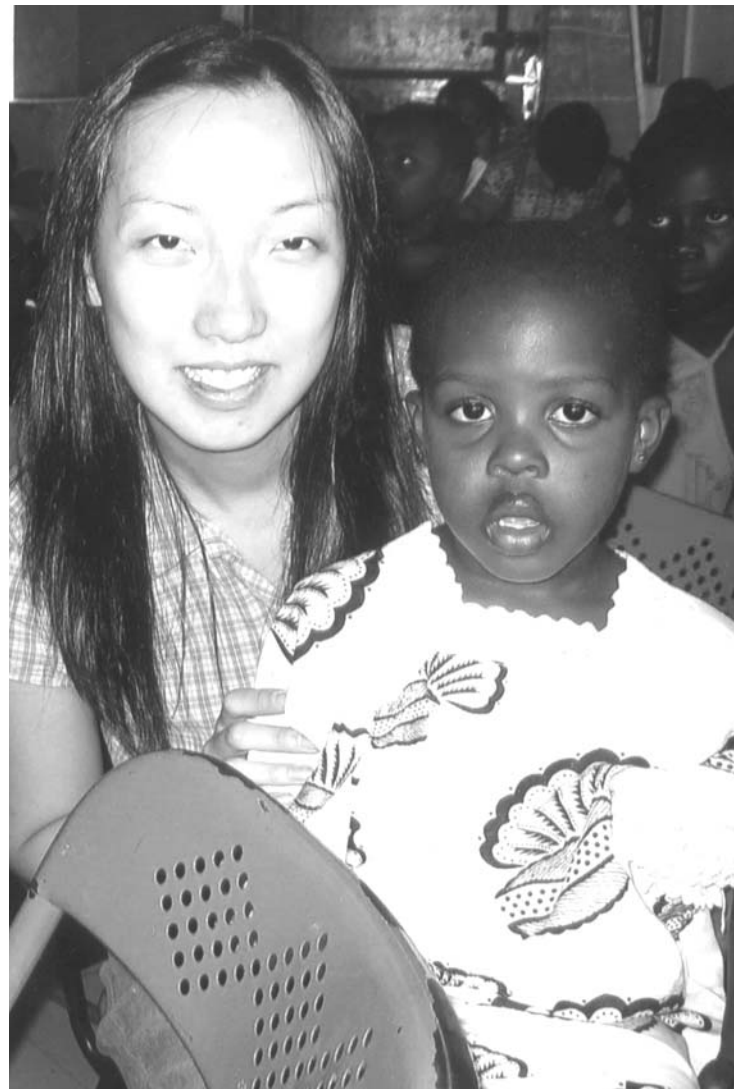
Clara also credits teachers who stayed after class and spent extra time with her. "Gradually I went from completely not understanding to being able to understand, but not able to respond. Then slowly I was able to respond, but I didn't really have the courage," Shih says. "It's an ongoing challenge for me to realize that I have important things to say, and to contribute."

Clara's American dream is to combine her passions for technology, education, and public service. Prior to becoming a Merage Fellow, Clara worked for four years teaching at-risk youth how to use technology to work more effectively. She started a summer camp program called Camp Amelia that teaches basic computer skills to inner city kids and sparks their interest in technology. She hopes to start a nonprofit company to provide free or at-cost software to nonprofit and government organizations.

"I believe that technology taught properly can empower, and that it can play a large role in breaking the cycle of poverty."



Clara being honored as one of 100 United States Presidential Scholars in June 2000.



Clara with children in Accra, Ghana in August 2004 at a summer science and technology program put on by Camp Amelia, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit founded by Clara and several Stanford classmates.

Mohamad Halawi

LEAVING LEBANON A TEENAGER, BECOMING A MAN IN AMERICA

Growing up in war-torn southern Lebanon with very limited resources for educational career development, Mohamad Halawi realized he would not be able to fulfill his ambitions in his homeland. So, in 2000, at the tender age of 17, he left his family and immigrated to the United States.

He had just \$1,000 in his pocket and spoke very little English—just enough “to get through normal daily activities,” he says. He attended community college for two years in Houston and paid his tuition by working 65 hours a week at two jobs.

He transferred to the University of Houston and graduated with a 4.0 GPA, while continuing to work so he could send money back to his parents in Lebanon. After graduation, Mohamad accepted a fellowship at the National Institutes of Health, before attending Duke University Medical School. He has already co-authored two journal publications and won an award from the American Association for Cancer Research.

“I have done things that were beyond my imagination when I first arrived in the U.S.” he says.

His American dream is to become a doctor in a teaching hospital, and perhaps go back to Lebanon to improve the country’s medical



Mohamad, 15 years old, speaking to the student body at his high school during a celebration of Lebanon's Independence Day

facilities and services. He hopes to raise awareness about health promotion and disease prevention so that people in Lebanon will “no longer be scared of diseases like cancer or HIV/AIDS.”

Mohamad applied for citizenship when he became eligible in August of 2006. During the 2006 Lebanese conflict, Mohamad was able to bring his parents from southern Lebanon to join him in the U.S.



Mohamad, 19 years old, getting his first hands-on research experience

The Merage Fellows DVD and planned activities are designed to help students talk about their own American Dreams. Teachers should conclude the planned activities by encouraging students to discuss their own American Dreams. If some students still find it difficult to participate in the classroom discussion, teachers should ask them to talk about their hopes concerning their future education, jobs, marriage, children, family, contributions to the community. Teachers should foster a classroom dialogue concerning student role models. The discussion should focus on what makes a good role model, including such qualities as hard work, ambition, willingness to overcome problems, courage, and a desire to contribute to their communities.

THEME ONE

LEAVING BEHIND MEMORIES AND PLACES

Several of the Merage Fellows in the video mention cultural differences between the United States and the countries they came from. Vilma Palma says she misses being able to go outside and hang out with her neighbors like she did when she lived in El Salvador. Felix Akinbote remembers rainbows from his childhood in Nigeria, but says he can't remember seeing a rainbow in America. Clara Shih talks about the difficulty of learning a new language, and Mohamad Halawi discusses food issues that he had as a newcomer to the United States.

PLANNED ACTIVITY

Divide students into groups of three or four. If possible, each group should have one immigrant student, one second-generation American (i.e. a student whose parents were immigrants) and one third-or fourth-generation American (i.e. a student whose ancestors immigrated to the U.S. many years ago).

Ask each group to imagine they were required to immigrate to the immigrant student's home country (if the group does not have an immigrant, students can choose any country). Students should talk in their groups about what they would miss about the United States if they immigrated to another country. The immigrant students in each group should act as a sounding board, speaking from their own lives about what kinds of social and cultural differences students can expect in other countries.

At the end of the discussion, each group should make a short presentation to the rest of the class, summarizing the top three experiences the group would miss if they immigrated to another country.

THEME TWO

BUILDING A NEW LIFE IN THE U.S.

Each of the Fellows in the video tells of a time when his or her family had to split up to achieve their dream. Vilma Palma's mother risked her own right to stay in the U.S. to go back and get her children from El Salvador. Felix Akinbote's father went to the U.S. to further his education, and tried to go back to Nigeria, but couldn't make ends meet in that country.

After Clara Shih and her family immigrated to the U.S., her father went back to work in Hong Kong for a while because he couldn't earn enough money in America. Mohamad Halawi immigrated to the United States by himself, leaving the rest of his family behind until he could bring them parents to join him in 2006.

For all of these remarkable young people, achieving the American dream has come with a price: splitting up the family (at least temporarily). But while the family remains extremely important to each Fellow, they also developed in America support networks based on friends, neighbors, co-workers, teachers, church groups, teammates, and volunteer organizations.

PLANNED ACTIVITY:

Ask students to write short essays about the kinds of support networks (including the importance of their own family) that they rely on in their daily lives. Their essays should address each kind of support network in a separate paragraph, and discuss that network's role and importance in their lives. Students should also talk about what they would do if they were unable to rely on that support network. For example, what would you do if you couldn't count on your family, at least initially, to help you when you immigrated to another country? What kind of support networks would the students build? How? How would you learn English? How would you get an education? How would you find work to support yourself?

THEME THREE:

ACHIEVING THE AMERICAN DREAM

The four Fellows in the video are well on their way to achieving their American dreams. Vilma Palma entered law school in 2006, Felix Akinbote and Mohamad Halawi are attending medical school, and Clara Shih is expanding Camp Amelia to several new locations and preparing to start her own technology company.

The Fellows all display incredible ambition to succeed. Some might say they have already achieved their American dreams. Yet each also talks of giving something back, of a responsibility to help others.

Palma hopes to establish a resource center to help new immigrants avoid the pitfalls that her family encountered. Akinbote plans to mentor other Nigerian kids. Shih says she believes strongly in helping other immigrants, especially in the area of education. Halawi says he was overwhelmed by the generosity of people who helped him when he came to the U.S. and feels a duty to repay that generosity.

PLANNED ACTIVITY:

Ask students to discuss the following questions. Remind students that there are no "correct" answers.

- How will you know when you have achieved your American Dream?
- Does the American Dream come with any responsibilities?
- Do Americans, regardless of when they immigrated, have a duty to give something back?

Divide students into small discussion groups. Each group discusses these questions for 15-20 minutes, then chooses a speaker to present the conclusions the group reaches. Some points for each group to consider include:

- How do the students define "giving back?" Do you need to devote your career to helping the community, like Vilma Palma, or is it enough to donate some money at the holidays?
- Which community should benefit from the students' desire to give back? Immigrants as a whole? Immigrants from the country you came from? The people who helped you along the way? People in your neighborhood? Immigrants from some other country who need the help the most? Are you giving back if you do nothing more than provide a better life for your own family?
- How do you know when it's appropriate to take time away from achieving your American dream to help others with theirs? Should you spend your 20s and 30s becoming as successful as possible and then your 40s and 50s giving back to the community? Or should you help others at every point in your life?

RESOURCES

- Migration Information Source, www.migrationinformation.org.
- United States Census Bureau, www.census.gov
- "Illegal immigrant turned U.S. citizen has come a long way," *Orange County Register*, June 25, 2006. Article on Vilma Palma.
- "UGA Honors Student Awarded 2006 Merage American Dream Fellowship," *Atlanta Daily World*, May 4, 2006. Article on Felix Akinbote.
- Halawi, Mohamad. "A Strategic and Moral U.S. Imperative." www.hamsaweb.org/halawi.html. Award-winning essay on the Middle East.
- *The New Americans* by Michael Barone (Regnery, 2001)
- *Reinventing the Melting Pot: The New Immigrants and What it Means to Be American* by Tamar Jacoby (Basic Books, 2004)
- *We Are Americans: Voices of the Immigrant Experience* by Dorothy and Thomas Hoobler (Scholastic Nonfiction, 2003)
- Immigration History Research Center: www.lhrc.umn.edu
- *The New Americans*: www.pbs.org/independentlens/newamericans