With a smile, Paul Manoff settled in to recollect his experience at University of Southern Maine’s Master of Science program in Adult and Higher Education. During the interview, Paul’s comments pointed to several themes about his experience as a graduate student at USM, i.e., connections, relationships, and the way that the degree provided him with many diverse opportunities.

Paul stated that the best part about his experience at USM was the relationships that he developed with both the professors and the other students. He recalled a summer institute entitled “Aging, Death and Bereavement” (which is no longer in the curriculum), and how it influenced his thinking about death. “The class helped me see death differently than I had before, as part of the natural cycle of life rather than maybe just as in the Greek mythology, when the string of life is cut.”

When asked how the Adult and Higher Education influences him still today, he summarized, “It helped me think in broader ways, to somehow step outside of myself and look at bigger pictures and systems.”

Paul commented that having this degree “opened a lot of doors.” In his career as an adult educator, Paul has taught English courses at the USM Lewiston-Auburn campus; at the University of New England; and at Andover, Casco Bay, and at South Maine Community Colleges, all positions he could not have attained without his Master’s degree. For years he also had a private part-time tutoring service in which he worked one-on-one and in small groups to help New Mainer immigrants learn to read and write English. All these experiences prepared Paul well for his current position as Director of the English Language Program at LearningWorks, a non-profit learning center that provides a broad range of educational support for at-risk populations in the communities of Portland, South Portland, Biddeford, Lewiston, and Sanford. The primary goal of the English Language Program is to help New Mainers develop or improve their spoken and written English skills as well as to cultivate cultural literacy.

On a typical day at LearningWorks, the English Language classrooms are filled with adult students from all corners of the world including but not limited to Angola, Somalia, Sudan, Burundi, Rwanda, Iraq, Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Congo, and South Korea. Paul described details about his programs’ six sets of ethnically diverse classrooms with excitement, his enthusiasm apparent as he described a typical day.

Paul spoke of the forty or so volunteer teachers and tutors he supervises at LearningWorks and the ways in which they coordinate their lessons to meet the varied needs of students at four different skill levels of classes, not only to teach English but also to help these new immigrants understand American culture as well as Maine’s own distinct traditions. Paul has great respect for the challenges his international students face and the barriers need to be overcome: “Some people had horrendous experiences and getting to America with their sanity intact, [and] well, that is amazing.”

One of the most striking facts about LearningWorks’ English Language Program is that all the teachers and tutors are volunteers. When asked how he recruits his teachers, Paul stated that he does not have to actively recruit volunteers. “Our volunteers usually come to us, sometimes through the service learning program at USM. Many times these individuals return to LearningWorks after having earned their credits simply to volunteer on their own time.” Paul’s relaxed and welcoming nature most certainly has something to do with the success of the volunteer program, the reason for their return, and why they often remain for years as most do.

Even though he graduated from the Adult and Higher Education Program more than 20 years ago, Paul still stays in touch with faculty and alumni by regularly participating in co-curricular events such as “Bagels by the Sea” and the annual capstone seminar celebration and luncheon. He also has generously given his time and talent to current students who seek informational interviews about LearningWorks or who are looking for directed study or internship opportunities. His overall relationship with the program has been long-lasting and strong.