Most immigrants learn English in order to integrate into the U.S. and achieve the American dream. For many, this means getting a higher paying job, owning a house or providing better opportunities for their family. For Therese Mukarusagara, a newcomer from Rwanda, her stark past make her goals simple: To find peace, to reunite her family and to regain her professional footing. And, while that alone may be ambitious, she promises that as soon as her English is good enough she wants to help other immigrants learn English as well.

“I need to speak English because I am in this country which speaks English and I am in a new society. I want to fit in it. And I want to have friends, to talk with them, to visit them and to find a job for my family because without English there are no good jobs. I am waiting for my children who are in my country, and I want to find a job for their life. If I have a job, I can help them have a good life.”

Though this dedicated Rwandan has only been in this country since mid-2005, inspired by her dream, she has already improved her English considerably. Therese began her English lessons almost immediately after her arrival in Boston, and has been attending classes and conversation groups four times a week at the St. Mark Community Education Program in Dorchester.

The warmth and hospitable environment provided by the St. Mark Community Education Program is what nurtures her persistence. “When I was coming here, the teachers, are very nice. Everybody is very happy for me, and (I) thank everybody and my teachers”

Therese’s yearning for learning instantly caught the eye of Cat Howell, Therese’s first year English teacher and Director of the program at St. Mark. “Therese is not a typical student,” says
Howell. “She knows how to study and wants to leverage her school knowledge, as much as possible.” Therese would constantly ask for extra homework and bring with her additional reading materials.

For Therese, proficiency in English means an ability to access a new world full of friends and support, and, she hopes, to make peace with her horrendous past in Rwanda. As her English has improved, says Howell, Therese has been able to talk about her life in Rwanda and to connect with the community around her.

“When I am around people and can speak English with them I feel good very good,” says Therese. “This country is good. It is a place which welcomes everyone and it helps everyone.”

Therese’s dedication to learning is likely a result of more than 30 years working as a kindergarten teacher in Rwanda. She loved her job and her country but the unbearable circumstances forced her to leave. The 1994 genocide in Rwanda wounded her for life. “My own children and members of my family were killed…. the criminals who did that came to kill us.”

Therese had five children including two sets of twins. Here in Boston she lives with her son, daughter-in-law, and 11-month-old grandchild, who she says is the love of her life and willingly lets Therese practice her English while she cares for him.

Once she gains her citizenship, Therese hopes to begin reuniting the rest of her family. Finding a job will be key to that goal. Ideally, she will return to her work as a teacher, though she knows that may be difficult. “Because I don’t know English, how can I teach children? It’s not easy for me.”
Children want to have a good teacher who knows everything. The children want to learn well. They need to really learn in English. To listen, to write, but I don’t have much vocabulary. Maybe in the future, when I learn English, I will teach children.”

For now, she stays focused on her English. As she progresses through the curriculum at St. Mark, she mulls ways that she can put her skills to use to help those who come along after her. “When I learn English, I will help others,” she says. “Now I don’t (know) much English, I cannot help. But in the future, when I know English I will.”