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News - Wednesday, December 13, 2006

English lessons open doors to new life

Nuestra Casa gives Latino parents skills to help their children and themselves

by Katharine Lu

Even though a long day of making pizzas had turned into a chilly night in East Palo Alto, Alberto Rodriguez was glad to be in his English class for adults. Sitting in a corner by the door, he even smiled as the teacher informed the two dozen students that a writing exercise was due the next day.

As the class ended at 8:30 p.m., students didn't bolt for the door. Instead, they began cleaning up the classroom, then saying hello and goodbye to friends before zipping up their coats and stepping out into the blue wintry November night.

Although Rodriguez emigrated from Mexico to California two years ago, he said it was difficult finding a class that fit his work schedule and his cultural background. But with the help of Nuestra Casa, a nonprofit agency that provides free English-language classes for the Latino community and Ravenswood School district in East Palo Alto, Rodriguez said that he is now able to learn English for the first time.

"Only English I learned, I learned here," he said as he waved goodbye to his classmates as they left for the night. "When I come, I speak nothing. Now I feel more comfortable to talk to everybody, go shopping, talk on the phone. Before at work, I only deliver pizza; now I can make them and take orders."

Nuestra Casa -- Our House in English -- goes beyond language instruction. The nonprofit aims to strengthen the community and cultivate local leadership by supporting families and encouraging self sufficiency. Based on the belief that families are the cornerstone to communities, Nuestra Casa focuses on educating the parents of the Latino community through adult English language-development classes.

Nuestra Casa has taught more than 800 students in the adult ESL program since its founding in 2002. The classes are 11 weeks long and offered in fall, winter and spring. This year, approximately 105 students are enrolled in the three-class series. By spring, many will graduate and become resources for other members in their community.

Nuestra Casa receives the majority of its funds from various foundations and nonprofits in the Bay Area, as well as limited funding from the city of East Palo Alto. It also received \$7,500 from the Palo Alto Weekly this past year, to help run the free classes. Executive Director Laura Valdez said that Nuestra Casa welcomes all types of donations, including volunteers to help students during class.

"We hope to encourage the community to be generous with their contributions, not only through money, but with their expertise, knowledge and time," she said.

Food and toy donations are on their wish list for the holidays as well, Valdez said.

Perhaps the most attractive aspect of Nuestra Casa is the free childcare it offers, said ESL Coordinator Lourdes Mugerza.

"We want to make the classes accessible to families, so we also provide tutoring and homework help at childcare so that both parents can come. Otherwise, one parent would have to stay at home and watch the kids," she said. "Many parents work two to three jobs."

The lessons are applicable to everyday life, and classes are structured with a theme every session. In fall, lessons focus on the educational system in California; in winter, students learn about health and medical care; and in spring, teachers discuss employment and family budgeting.

Mugerza said that integrating real-world situations into the class lessons, such as reading a report card or going into the bank, is crucial for helping students learn to be self-sufficient.

"We are not an ESL program in a vacuum. Our students feel comfortable not having to rely on their children for translation," she said, using an example of filling out a medical application. "We don't want to fill out the form for them. We want them to fill out the form themselves."

One key to the program's success is its high retention rate and insistence on regular attendance. If students cannot make it to one class, they are required to notify their teacher or the ESL coordinator ahead of time. Otherwise, a student is dropped after the third absence. For the staff of Nuestra Casa, the move is not just educational, it's a financial necessity. A lack of funding reduced the number of classes each session from six to three this year, and the wait list has climbed all the way to 75.

One reason for the demand, according to Valdez: Many agencies in East Palo Alto don't reflect the needs of the Latino community, which now comprises nearly 60 percent of the population. According to the U.S. Census 2000, 44 percent of East Palo Alto residents are foreign born, and 65 percent speak a language other than English at home.

Since many children of immigrant families are born in the United States, Nuestra Casa believes language acquisition is critical for teaching parents how to be proactive.

Based on a survey administered by Nuestra Casa to East Palo Alto residents last summer, parents blame themselves for their children's performance in school. Valdez said the language and cultural barriers prevent parents from helping their children with homework, reviewing tests or participating in school board meetings.

Nuestra Casa also hopes to promote Latino involvement in local leadership. Beginning next year, Nuestra Casa will organize the Parents As Leaders Program. The workshops will be held in Spanish and educate parents on the educational system, history of East Palo Alto and how to become active in their children's schools.

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"We are trying to increase the visibility of the Latino community in EPA," Valdez said. "It's a voice not often heard."

Besides attending classes, Alberto Rodriguez also will participate this year in Nuestra Casa's annual Posada, a Mexican holiday in which participants reenact Mary and Joseph asking for shelter. After being refused at several houses, participants celebrate Christmas in a house with Nuestra Casa and other members of the community with food, music and friends.

Rodriguez said he is excited to attend Posada and enjoy Christmas in California. He added that he plans to continue taking classes at Nuestra Casa with his wife while his two young boys are in childcare.

"I started at level one, now I am at level two. It is a good program for me," he said. "I am very thankful for it."

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