

The ADVOCATE

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Language Lessons

Learning words that work

Day laborers master on-the-job vocabulary

By Magdalene Perez

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STAMFORD -- Mauricio Mendez didn't speak any English when he came to the United States from Guatemala four years ago to find work. Now, he sometimes translates for friends who, like him, are day laborers from Latin America. In English, he can introduce himself, offer to do jobs such as painting or landscaping, and ask for payment. Mendez, like scores of other day laborers in the city, took his first steps toward learning English through a free class offered by the Stamford Partnership, a nonprofit group. Now in its second year, the volunteer program, which focuses on teaching words that relate to the types of manual labor the men do, has expanded, with a second class allowing more advanced students to learn grammar and parts of speech beyond work-related vocabulary drills.

"I intentionally use lessons that are not about landscaping so they can see the connections," said Celia Batan, a volunteer who teaches 10 to 20 advanced students a week. "I make sure that we touch on day-to-day applications, like when you are filling out a form, what is the format of the date?"

The classes began in 2007 when Susan Benthall, an adult education teacher, decided she could help immigrant workers she saw standing on the side of the road seeking jobs. The classes started outdoors, under the Interstate 95 overpass near Lafayette Street, where the city has designated a "harassment-free zone" for day laborers. Last year, the East Side church Ministerios Bethania volunteered space for the classes.

"My idea was, if they could explain better what they could do, they might have a better shot at getting a job," Benthall said. The program seems to do that. Day laborers have told Benthall they found work after learning how to talk about certain tasks. Raul Oseguera, 28, said the class has taught him many useful words and enough to act as a translator in some situations.

"Lots of people ask you if you speak English," said Oseguera, from Honduras. "It's something very important."

Now Batan, an immigrant from the Philippines and longtime corporate trainer and instructor, is working with students who are able to progress to a more in-depth English class.

First, she "diagnosed" students by giving tests to see who could read, identify numbers and understand simple phrases in English. She took those students to a smaller classroom, where she supplements conventional teaching methods with poetry, music and discussions about the men's families and home countries.

On a recent Tuesday afternoon, Batan brought her ukulele for a special English rendition of "La Cucaracha." Eight men dressed in jeans, work boots, sweatshirts and baseball caps already knew the words.

"It is a good day to do landscaping," they sang. "Si, señora I can work!"

Batan's songs inspired a good amount of laughter among the men, as did her discussion of how many brothers and sisters each student has, an opportunity to reinforce a previous lesson about ordinal numbers.

"Where are you in the family?" Batan asked as she listened for the proper pronunciation of "fourth."

"Good," she said encouragingly after a participant nailed it after a few tries.

Some men, including Mendez, have started to supplement the Stamford Partnership classes with other English courses offered by the city's adult education system.

Mendez said he learns more about how to conjugate verbs in the city classes but likes the Stamford Partnership program because it teaches him lessons related to his job as a landscaper.

"It's different over there," Mendez said of the classes at Cloonan Middle School. "They learn the verbs 'to do' and 'to be,' but I need to know about the work."

The Stamford Partnership, which receives public and private funding, provides about \$1,000 per month for free lunches for the men who attend the classes, said Kathleen Walsh, president of the organization. Among others, Pitney Bowes helped fund the English classes last year.

Yet the program's goals, to help people who largely entered the country illegally to find work, are not accepted by all. Paul Streitz, a Darien resident and founder of Connecticut Citizens for Immigration Control, said the actions of the Stamford Partnership volunteers should be punished under federal laws that prohibit alien residents from entering or residing in the United States.

"Everyone thinks that they're good Samaritans by helping, but in my opinion it's criminal," Streitz said. "Giving people money -- helping them, aiding them -- is inducing them to stay here."

The classes are at their highest numbers, from 50 to 60 students, in the winter, when fewer men find work. But soon they will be on hiatus. Because summer is a peak season for landscaping and construction jobs, the classes have a recess from late spring through early fall.

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