

## **A better life through tutoring: English class volunteers help adults be better parents, workers**

**Sandra V. Rodriguez** • March 10, 2010

**ASHEVILLE** — Ana Rosa Garnica wants to be sure she can help her 4-year-old son with his homework when he begins school next year.

That's why the stay-at-home mom, who doesn't speak English, was in the beginners' Speakers of Other Languages [class](#) Sunday. She spent two hours on a sunny, mild afternoon learning her ABCs at the Parish of St. Eugene Catholic Church in North Asheville.

“It's a disadvantage because I'm not going to be able to help him do his homework,” she said in Spanish.

Garnica enrolled in the free class through the Literacy Council of Buncombe County, which has about 250 [students](#) on its roster. Students and nearly 150 volunteers commit to two hours per week in a classroom or to one-on-one sessions for nine months.

Dozens of others who want the help Garnica is getting just have to wait, however. With more than 100 people on a waiting list for [tutors](#), the council is desperate for more volunteers — and for places to put them.

The past year has seen an increase in the number of classes, from about 15 to 25, largely because of a \$10,000 grant from Dollar General Corp.

ESL program coordinator Erin Sebelius is working hard to recruit host facilities for more classes so the program can serve more people.

“I think a reasonable goal would be able to offer classes at all of the schools in Buncombe County,” she said. “I think it's almost a no-brainer that the schools should be offering something like this ... because more and more, every year, of their clients are second language learners.”

Sebelius has made some inroads into area schools. For example, teachers from Erwin High and Roberson High have reached out to the literacy council to foster a teacher-parent [relationship](#) with bilingual students' parents.

“These teachers personally are letting us use their classrooms and they are present while we are doing it,” Sebelius said. She would like foster similar partnerships in more schools in the county.

### **'Pretty intense'**

Volunteers do not need previous teaching experience.

Tutors get 15 hours of classroom instruction before beginning to teach. They take a refresher course on language and grammar, discuss how adults learn and review teaching techniques. They practice the lessons on each other before heading into the classroom, which vary in size from two to six students.

Sebelius said the training “can be pretty intense.”

But Betsy Vandermeer enjoys the work. She is a retired teacher who tutors a basic beginners' class at St. Eugene's every Sunday. She likes getting creative in her lesson plans and working with people.

Her students, Jose Zacarias Esparza and Esther Flores Velos, had little more than a third-grade education in their native Mexico.

So learning English can be harder for Vandermeer's students than some, although she tries to make the class as fun and as stress-free as possible.

Esparza wants to learn English so he can be more effective in his job. He said he often felt bad about being unable to communicate with the tenants or their clients at the office building he [cleans](#). Esparza often felt the need to thank people for being patient with him because he knew very little English.

But, he said in Spanish, “I've gotten better. It's just getting up and going to class to study. The rest is putting some effort into it.”

“It's a slow process because we come together two hours a week,” Vandermeer said. “If I could have them four days a week we could do a lot more, but you do with what you have.”

Vandermeer said she gets help from an unexpected source, turning to each side and lifting her hair to reveal two hearing aids.

“It makes it harder to understand. But it has a good side, too. It means that I’m very stubborn about having them pronounce (words) correctly,” she said with a laugh. “So there’s a plus side to this.”

### **For the children**

Most of the women tutor Vandermeer have talked with said they are taking classes because they want to help their children with school.

“They really feel helpless,” she said. “It’s like they are not part of their children’s lives unless they learn the language.”

Sebelius said that’s an all too common concern expressed by the majority of adults who come to the Literacy Council asking for help.

The second reason most people take the class is to get a better job, she said.

Most people, students and teachers alike, stick with the program once they’ve gotten involved. The retention rates are about 85 percent for students, and 90 percent for volunteers within a nine-month period.

According to the Literacy Council, about 70 percent of students are from Latin America and 20 percent are from Eastern Europe, although students represent 21 countries from around the world, including Thailand and China.



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Luz Maldonado teaches Ana Rosa Garnica, a student at St. Eugene's Catholic Church studying English as a second language. The Literacy Council of Buncombe County is looking for

volunteers to teach the more than 100 people awaiting assistance. (Margaret [Hester/mhester@citizen-times.com](mailto:Hester/mhester@citizen-times.com))



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Betsy Vandermeer, left, tutors Jose Esparza and Esther Flores in English at St. Eugene's Catholic Church. Jose said he wants to improve his English to do better at his job. (Margaret [Hester/mhester@citizen-times.com](mailto:Hester/mhester@citizen-times.com))

## GET INVOLVED

The Literacy Council is always looking for volunteers to either teach small classes or provide one-on-one tutoring. Volunteers are asked to commit to two hours a week for nine months.

Training, which takes about 15 hours, is done by the Literacy Council of Buncombe County, 33 College St.

The council is also looking for partnerships with community organizations, churches or schools to host the classes.

For more information, contact [literacytutors@litcouncil.com](mailto:literacytutors@litcouncil.com) or call 254-3442, ext 204.