

American Sueños

by Tina Griego
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Abdiel Alejandro Garcia (foreground), Agustin Bravo (center) and Marvin Marquez Castro (far right) are all working towards their GEDs. (Photo by Tina Griego)

Somewhat to his own surprise, Agustin Bravo, a 30-year-old landscaper from Michoacan, Mexico, finds himself seated in a South Side community center classroom studying for his GED diploma.

“OK, *vamos a hablar sobre la Constitution de los Estados Unidos*,” says the teacher, Rocio Gonzalez, who came to the United States from Guadalajara when she was a child.

“What year did the Constitutional Convention begin?” she asks in rapid Spanish.

“1787,” the class responds, also in Spanish.

“What was the last colony to ratify the Constitution?”

“Rhode Island,” says Abdiel Alejandro Garcia, a 34-year-old painter sitting next to Bravo and who, like Bravo, would not have believed anyone who told him he’d end up spending his evenings studying American history.

“I didn’t even realize I had the opportunity,” Bravo says.

You must first know this about Bravo, who speaks three languages and ushers parishioners to their Sunday pews and who now sits in this Sacred Heart Center classroom: He had no intention of staying in this country.

He had a plan, taken from the Well-Intentioned Migrant Playbook. Come to the United States. Work. Send money home to support the family. Save what you do not spend. Go home. Bravo gave himself four years. Five years, tops. He was not yet 15.

He took a bus to the border, hiked through a mountain range to join his older brother in California and, in short order, they moved to the Richmond suburbs. That was almost 15 years ago. Half of his life has been spent in Mexico and half here.

He knows the question is coming. Why would a man who has no permanent legal status in this country want a GED diploma? It is a good question, he says. The answer is that he is one of the fortunate few who has a boss who, five years ago, filed the necessary papers to help him gain approval for a work permit. Moving from work authorization to permanent legal residency is a legal long shot, but Bravo sees an opportunity where one did not previously exist.

Still, he says, that is only half the answer.

He started volunteering to help at Sacred Heart Catholic Church, which has become his second home. He became a Eucharistic minister. He started going to the **community center across the street** and enrolled in its Latino Leadership Institute.

“Something inside me changed,” he says. “I don’t know how to say it. My life goals changed. Before, I never wanted [to] get involved. I hated politics because I always thought. ‘Whatever happens, it won’t help me.’ Now I see that as long as people think like that, nothing will ever change. I started to meet the community and I saw they need so much and something came into my heart. I saw that I could help them. But first I had to study. When I study and understand what

I am talking about, maybe then I can change other people's minds. How can they believe me if I don't try to do something different?"

He joined the GED in Spanish class that Sacred Heart offers the immigrant community with the help of volunteers, foundations and [VCU's Division of Community Engagement](#).

More than 110 students took GED classes at the center last year. They come because they are parents who want to help their children with homework or because they are trying to meet legal requirements to stay in the United States or because they simply want more education. To be here is to do something many had not previously allowed themselves: to aspire to something greater than the role into which they have been cast. To be more than steady hands and a strong back. To declare themselves a part of this community.

"They inspire me," Gonzalez says. "I can see the transformation. With Agustin, he didn't believe he was good enough. And now he is blossoming. He is borrowing books from me and reading them and asking me questions about them. He is writing letters to state delegates about driver's licenses for the undocumented. It's amazing."

While taking the classes, Bravo became electrified by the Constitution and the promise in its opening words, "We, the people."

"Before, I had no idea," he says. "I see that the people who wrote the Constitution, they say every man is created equal with equal opportunities, and that's what they think: Every person living in the U.S. has rights. You have the right to speak. You have the right to assemble. If someone had told me this earlier, they might have saved me time."

Bravo takes copious notes in class. He takes pictures of the text projected on the board. He will take the social studies test a few days later in an adult education testing center where he is made to walk through a metal detector. It is such an unexpected affront that he is rattled. He stares at a blank U.S. map with the outline of 50 states he must identify and flounders. He will come up one point short. And he will try again.

He has a new plan: to become a citizen, start his own landscaping business and help his family join him here.

"I cannot be president, because I was not born here," he says. "But maybe I can be a mayor one day. Maybe I can be a delegate."

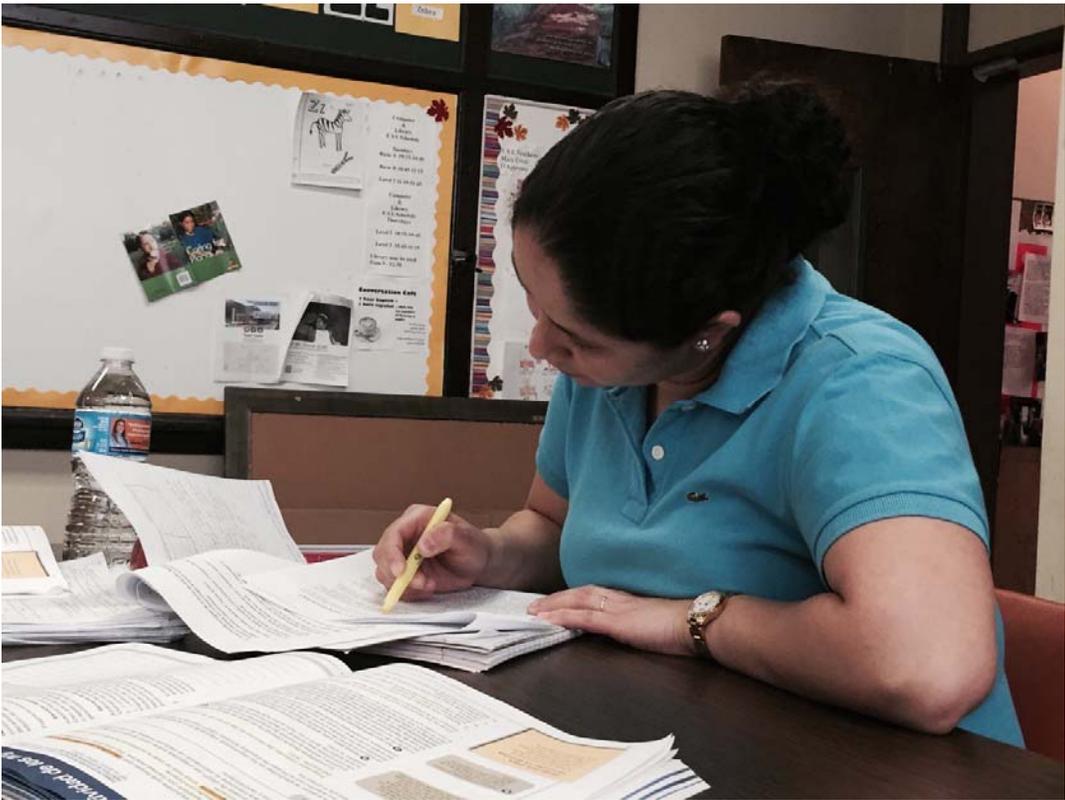
Between God and the Constitution, he says, all things are possible.



“What year did the Constitutional Convention begin?” asks the teacher, Rocio Gonzalez, in rapid Spanish. Gonzalez came to the U.S. from Guadalajara when she was a child. (Photo by Tina Griego)



Gonzalez shares a laugh with Bravo between lessons. (Photo by Tina Griego)



Olga Siguil Gonzalez is seen here studying diligently. Her hard work paid off - she received her GED on July 11. She is the first in the class to do so. (Photo by Tina Griego)



Gonzalez's hard-earned certificate. (Photo by Tina Griego)