



Students participate in an ESL (English as a Second Language) class at the Sacred Heart Center in Richmond. While parents participate in their classes, their children are involved in activities that help them advance their language skills in both English and Spanish.

Sacred Heart Center offers help to mothers and children

As young mothers are in class twice a week to learn English as a second language, their small children are in another room where they have group activities and learn how to interact with others their age.

This scene occurs each Tuesday and Thursday morning at the Sacred Heart Center in South Richmond. The children range in age from 18 months to four years old.

And if anyone thinks that the children's group is largely play time, they would be mistaken.

"It's not just an effort to keep the children entertained while the parents are studying, but it's a program to help the children learn by advancing their languages (in both English and Spanish) and how to interact with other children," said Ana Martinez, outreach and community initiatives coordinator at the center.

"That's the best way to describe the school readiness program," she added.

Ms. Martinez, who grew up in Monterey in northern Mexico, has lived in the United States for almost seven years. She speaks English with barely a trace of an accent, likely because at an early age she learned English at a private Catholic school in Mexico.

She and her Maryland-born husband moved to Richmond a year ago after living six years in Washington. There Ms. Martinez worked with the Organization of American States where she was program officer. In her duties she was involved with projects ranging from violence prevention among Central American youths to two separate peace processes between gangs, one in El Salvador and the other in Honduras.

She made multiple trips each year to most of the Central American countries.

“I had to go to several prisons in Honduras and visit different municipalities in El Salvador where the gangs are,” Ms. Martinez said.

Now in Richmond for the past year she is heavily involved in helping Latino families learn about opportunities geared to help them better able to participate in their community.

“While the parents are studying English, the children come for a bilingual readiness program,” Ms. Martinez said, adding the program is known as Pasitos Exitosos (First steps to success).



Teachers Liliana Tabares and Simone Frantz, center and right standing, are pictured with mothers with their daughters Natalie and Mayra Garcia from Mexico and Violeta and Dery Lopez from Colombia.

“Most of the kids speak only Spanish at home, but they will soon be enrolled in school and starting to get familiar with English vocabulary,” she explained. “Then it will be less of a shock when they start school and only hear English.”

The Tuesday and Thursday classes have both volunteers working hand in hand with the staff to engage the children in learning.

And when the children depart with their mothers at noon, the teachers and volunteers separately make observation notes on each child to help chart their progress. Each child’s first name is posted and is visible to both children and adults.

“We have three volunteers in every class and we could not do without them,” said Simone Frantz, one of the teachers.

“We help them with the routines in the classroom,” said Tara Fernandez, a volunteer who has a background in speech therapy.

Labels in both English and Spanish are posted in various places throughout the classroom. Underneath the wall clock are separate words “clock” and “reloj.”

Adult education is the key to making a better life for Latino families and it is a primary focus of the Sacred Heart Center “so they can meet whatever goals they have,” said Tanya Gonzalez, executive director of Sacred Heart Center since July 2016.

She explained that the language classes help enable parents to be more comfortable when speaking with their children’s teacher or to a doctor when their child is ill. Being proficient in English also raises chances for them to have a better paying job.

Ms. Gonzalez was born and spent her early years in McAllen, Tex., a town five minutes from the Texas-Mexico border. She has lived in Richmond since she moved here with her parents in 1990.

She graduated from Midlothian High School in Chesterfield County and then from Brown University with a degree in Latin American Studies. She is currently enrolled in a Masters of Public Administration program at Virginia Commonwealth University.

While she is pleased with the various education programs for adults, Ms. Gonzalez seeks to expand the center’s comprehensive educational efforts to offer more programs for youth and children.

“The Sacred Heart Center is already a hub for the Latino community, but we want it to be a hub for the entire family,” she said. “I see us expanding in what we are offering.”

Classes are held on Monday and Wednesday night for permanent residents who want to become U.S. citizens. Students must be prepared to answer 100 questions pertaining to American citizenship, although not all questions are asked in the test prepared and monitored by the federal U.S. Citizen and Immigration Services.

Scott Hansen, a volunteer who teaches the citizenship class at Sacred Heart Center, said there are 10 adults in the current class which lasts 12 weeks. Classes are offered three times a year.

Father Jack Podsiadlo, a Jesuit who is Director of the Latino Leadership Institute at Sacred Heart Center, came to Richmond three years ago after working with the Nativity Mission Center, a Jesuit middle school on New York’s Lower East Side