

EDUCATION

## Family language

### A Springfield program joins parents and children in English studies

By Randi Bjornstad

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Of the many parts of her job, the one Paulina Mross probably loves most is on Thursday nights when the families in the Pilas! family literacy program gather at Moffitt Elementary School in Springfield.

Parents go to their classes while their children have their own —preschool readiness for the toddlers, math and reading for primary students and homework club for the older kids —and then they all join up for some bilingual fun at the end.

The Pilas! program is for families whose first language is Spanish, and it's just one program among many that is part of the nonprofit organization called Downtown Languages: The Steps to Success,

which helps local people from all over the world improve their English as well as their ability to make their way in the community.

“In our session that just ended, we had people from China, Japan, Vietnam, Laos, Ukraine, Russia, Guatemala, Mexico, Uruguay, Brazil, Korea, Iran and India —and maybe more,” said Mross, who grew up in Mexico and came to the United States when she was 18.

“I studied English when I was in school in Mexico, but it was mostly reading and writing. Speaking a second language is a lot different,” she said.

At 39, she feels she’s been “studying forever.” She majored in business as an undergraduate; taught Spanish at the University of Oregon, the University of Portland and Willamette University; and is half done with her dissertation toward a Ph.D. in Spanish literature.

“This has to be the most rewarding job I have ever had,” Mross said of her position as executive director of Downtown Languages. “I feel here I can merge all my skills in one place.”

‘It’s very challenging’

Having faced the obstacles of assimilation herself — her maiden name was Ana Paulina Romo Villasenor —Mross obviously has a keen empathy for the 600 or so students annually who seek out Downtown Languages.

“We start with core classes of three levels of English, from readiness —no English at all — to basic language having to do with life skills and then progressively more fluent speaking,” Mross said. “The sessions are five weeks each, with topics such as health, job, school, community, family, transportation and holidays.”

Most people do each level at least twice, some three or four times, in part because many are starting reading and writing from scratch.

“Quite a few of our students have no literacy skills in any language when they begin with us,” Mross said. “They’re often people who have had no opportunity to go to school at all. So we start them with Spanish-language literacy at the same time. If they can begin to approach their own language that way, it helps them with their English. It’s very challenging.”

In addition to basic language classes, Downtown Languages also offers classes for those seeking citizenship, computer classes and tutoring for people preparing to take GED exams for high-school equivalency.

Costs of the classes are minimal: \$20 for the five-week English classes and computer classes; \$25 for citizenship classes; and no charge for Spanish literacy or GED readiness.

Downtown Languages got its start in 2004 “because Lane Community College had a huge waiting list of people wanting to take English as a second language, especially at the beginning levels,” Mross said. “Several families who are especially interested in helping people find literacy got together and set up a trust to offer these services at a minimal cost. It was a wonderful idea, and it really has been a success for so many people.”

The earlier, the better

She has a profound respect for the single people, couples and entire families who come to classes week after week to better their English —and therefore their lives — often after long days of work and school.

“I have found in my own life that being bilingual can be difficult,” said Mross, who speaks seemingly flawless English with a lilting accent. “I think when you grow up with one language and then try to master another and use it every day, you sometimes don’t speak either one perfectly. Studies show that language solidifies in the brain by the age of 7, so the earlier people can learn, the better they can do.”

Many of the children who come to Pilas! at Moffitt Elementary with their parents on Thursdays are younger than 7, and they do seem to pick up English with greater ease than their older siblings or parents.

Cecilia Martinez, who just started the class two months ago, concentrates hard in her class while her children, 12-year-old Adriana Santiago and Fernando Santiago, 10, spend their time at homework club.

With Mross as interpreter, Martinez said she needs to learn English “because here most people don’t speak Spanish, and there is a need to communicate when you go shopping, talk about the children’s schooling and get medical care.”

Martinez works as a cook in a Mexican restaurant and came to the U.S. from the Mexican state of Oaxaca. But “it is still good to be able to speak English,” she said. “I want to learn English more and more.”

Her husband arrived in this country first for work, and both children were born here and speak accent-free English as well as Spanish, she said.

Her daughter, Adriana, also can read and write in Spanish, but her son, Fernando, does not. “I also would like to teach them to speak Zapotec,” which is the indigenous language she learned as a child and that one of her grandmothers back in Mexico speaks almost exclusively, Martinez said.

“But it is too difficult —there is too much work,” she said.

Chris Robinson, who teaches the Pilas! class for Downtown Languages, says he would be “hard-pressed to say I have ever had a group of more dedicated, motivated people” in his more than a decade of teaching English as a second language than the classes he now teaches.

“Learning English for them is critical, and they study very hard for themselves and their children,” Robinson said. “They want to speak English so they can assimilate into society and their children can have a good life here. I realize how hard it is for these moms and dads, who

are dead-tired at the end of a long day, to come here consistently and work so hard. I am always enriched by them; I hope they are as much by me.”

### Engaging the whole family

After the Thursday evening language classes end, everyone gathers in Robinson’s classroom for 30 minutes of putting their bilingual language skills to work. Several volunteers from the Southtowne Rotary Club in Eugene bring picture books with English and the corresponding Spanish on the pages, and parents and children take turn reading the passages.

“The children often have their own special challenges in this situation,” Mross said. “Many times they enter elementary school with only Spanish, so they not only have to learn to speak English but also to read and write it at the same time. So they begin to fall behind a little from the start, and that’s one reason there is an achievement gap for many Hispanic children that becomes worse as time goes on. It’s something we really want to work on, to help the whole family succeed.”

To her, that’s the essence of the Pils! program.

“For me, I love it because the whole family is engaged together in literacy,” Mross said. “The parents love it because they’re learning and their kids are cared about, too.”

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Address: 1035 Willamette St.

Phone: 541-686-8483

Online: [www.downtownlanguages.org](http://www.downtownlanguages.org)