

Language classes help immigrants find success

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Editor's note: This is the first in a series of articles profiling individuals who benefit from services provided by United Way-funded agencies. United Way of Lane County is in its annual fall fundraising campaign.

There are a lot of similarities between Gloria Formick and Antonio González.

Both were born in Mexico. Both came to the United States without any postsecondary education. Neither spoke much English when they first arrived.

In recent years, both have been star pupils at Downtown Languages, a nonprofit agency that offers English as a second language, citizenship and computer classes in downtown Eugene. The agency will receive United Way funding for the first time this year in the amount of \$10,000.

These days, Formick and González claim another similarity: a long list of clear-cut, achievable dreams.

Formick, who is married and has one child and has lived in Lane County for 18 years, achieved one of her longtime personal objectives in June: She became a U.S. citizen, thanks in part to a class she took at Downtown Languages.

"I never thought I could do it," said Formick, 40. "But the teacher who helped me was too good. She prepared me so well that the test felt too easy. ... I'm so excited and proud to be American."

Formick, who completed high school in Mexico City before moving to this country, first arrived at Downtown Languages a year ago.

Previously, she had worked two jobs — as a Spanish teacher at a bilingual language school and as a part-time Taco Bell employee.

“I was so busy, I had no time for dreams,” she said.

But her inability to communicate well in spoken English was a serious hindrance in her everyday life, Formick said.

“It was very difficult because it felt like everyone was talking too fast,” she said. “I had to use sign language just for people to understand me.”

Formick is enrolled in a morning English class at Downtown Languages, which fits in perfectly with her work schedule at her new job at New Dream Family Child Care in west Eugene.

Her English has improved a lot in the past year, she said, and she has needed every bit of her new fluency at the day care.

“Sometimes I have to talk English all day,” she said.

After she completes all her English courses — and the computer course she started this month — Formick sees her next step as getting her teaching diploma from Lane Community College. She wants to be a middle school Spanish teacher.

“That’s the big dream,” she said.

For Gonzalez, the big dream is to become a chef.

The son of a farmer in the Oaxaca province in Mexico, Gonzalez never completed more than elementary school. He left the countryside for Mexico City when he was 14. He owned his own taxi business, but when he turned 42 — with gas prices rising, a son enrolled in a private university and a daughter in a private high school — he realized he wasn’t making enough money to continue paying for their education.

He moved to the United States with his wife.

“At first, everything was very difficult,” he said. “I didn’t know people, and I couldn’t speak with them. I had to adjust to cultural differences, too.”

The only person he knew when he arrived in Lane County was a cousin, who directed him to Downtown Languages. He started his first English class in 2006, two years after the organization opened its doors.

“There was a lot of homework, but many of the pronunciations were similar to Zapoteca (a Native American language that he spoke growing up),” he said. “That helped me learn faster.”

Now a permanent legal U.S. resident, Gonzalez, 52, works as a dishwasher and food preparer at Turtles Bar and Grill in Eugene, and hopes to become a chef at another restaurant in the future.

“Without speaking English, I could never be a chef,” he says.

Because he never earned a high school diploma as a teenager, he is also working on getting his graduation equivalency degree with classes at LCC.

“Getting my GED is very important to me,” he said. “If I ever go back to Mexico, I could use it to do

many things.”

Gonzalez is also taking a computer class at Downtown Languages.

He learned how to set up his first e-mail account the other day — which is funny, he said, because his son is now a computer engineer back in Mexico City.

“He’s very proud of me,” Gonzalez said. “He says, ‘Good job, Dad, keep learning.’”

Gonzalez said he is grateful to Downtown Languages for all the tools they have given him to help him adjust to living in the United States and making his life better.

“I feel like I learn so much every day when I come here,” he said. “All this learning, it makes me feel like a newborn.”

UNITED WAY OF LANE COUNTY

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