

Library's Literacy Program Breaks Language Barrier

By Maresa Archer

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When Josefina crossed the border from Mexico into California, she did not cross the cultural barrier.

It took 14 years and a national amnesty program to bring Josefina to the English course offered by Huntington Central Library's Family Literacy Program.

Josefina, 35, has lived in Huntington Beach since she and her parents left their native Mexico in 1976 in search of a better life in America. What they found was a system that allowed them to live and work without learning English.

"It was not necessary because my employer spoke Spanish and I live in a Spanish community. Now, with the amnesty program, I want to go to school and learn the language so I can communicate with English speakers," Josefina said through an interpreter.

Benjamin, who, like Josefina, asked that his last name not be revealed, worked in the fields his first three years in California.

He and his three brothers left their homeland because the few jobs available paid wages that were too low to live on.

Benjamin and his brothers take turns sending money home to the parents and siblings left behind in Mexico.

Now, after five years, Benjamin works indoors and finally has some free time to devote to his English studies. He said he hopes he will be able to get a better job

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once he has mastered the language.

"I want to be able to help my family more, and I want to be able to talk to American women," said the 22-year-old with a smile.

Both Josefina and Benjamin are literate in their own language, which makes it easier for them to learn English, explained Anne Schwartz, director of the English As A Second Language (ESL) Literacy Program.

The program is funded by the Literacy Volunteers of America under the auspices of the Central Library.

The program's primary goal is to teach parents how to read and write English so that their children do not grow up illiterate.

"If you don't have books at home; you aren't going to grow up valuing reading. We stress reading aloud to their children and helping the kids with their home work," Schwartz said.

She is quick to point out that everyone is welcome.

"The first thing we do is teach them survival skills; how to dial 911 or talk to a doctor. We also teach them their name, address

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and phone number."

To help the students become more comfortable with the learning process, each tutor tries to individualize the program.

Often, the first step is to ask the pupil to express a single thought that the tutor then writes down.

"All of a sudden the student sees their words in print; that's very empowering to them. Then they can start by learning those words.

"It works much better than trying to teach them from a child's book," Schwartz said.

Students spend two hours a week with their tutors, plus they are assigned homework. Currently, 50 students are taking classes at the Oakview Elementary School site.

Schwartz said a few more are taught at the Guardian Savings building on Warner Boulevard.

"We try to keep the classes in the Oakview neighborhood because that is where the need is and because this is a poverty area, many of the residents do not have transportation to go elsewhere," Schwartz said.

Although the classes do not fulfill the amnesty program's requirement for citizenship, Schwartz said many of the students take them in addition to their amnesty classes.

Other students could not qualify for the amnesty program and the Oakview classes are their only means for instruction.

The program's grant runs out in May and Schwartz has already applied for a renewal.

To raise additional funds, the Library Literacy Program is holding a fundraiser on May 7 at the Central Library.

"We wrote to many celebrities and asked them to send autographed copies of their favorite book for auction. Robert De Niro donated an 1897 copy of Moby Dick and Alan Alda sent a copy of one of his favorite MASH episodes," Schwartz said.

Tickets for the event are \$20 per person and can be purchased by calling (714) 841-3773.

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