

Senior citizens launch program to help teach immigrant employees English

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Highlight: Senior citizens at the Stoneridge Creek in Pleasanton have started an ESL program for employees, for free.

Body

PLEASANTON - When residents in a retirement community would leave notes for Claudia Martinez, the housekeeper often was not sure what they wanted her to do.

Martinez, who immigrated from Mexico, could only understand a little English. But now, thanks to an innovative program at the community, she can even decipher her 401(k) statements.

"I feel more comfortable, more secure, because I don't need help," she said.

Gonzalez, 51, works at the Stoneridge Creek senior living community, which has begun offering its employees a resident-driven program: free English tutoring once a week, and employees are even paid for their time. The tutors are volunteers - residents of the retirement community who are former teachers, engineers, pilots or have experience teaching English as a Second Language.

Gonzalez has been in the States for 25 years, and has worked at Stoneridge for about three years. But she's never had a formal English class until April, when she received a private tutor - Jule Saracco, 83, a retired teacher and resident. After months of tutoring, she already has gained confidence in her reading and writing.

The program may be the first of its kind in the area - where senior citizens in a retirement community are volunteering to teach employees of the very community they live in.

"In a world where we're seeing a lot of hostility toward immigrants, Stoneridge Creek residents and staff are banding together to create unique relations that are changing lives forever," said Executive Director Zeke Griffin in a statement.

Residents sometimes leave specific housekeeping instructions when they're not home. Before, Gonzalez would try to enlist the help of another person in her department to help her decipher the notes. But after six months of lessons, Gonzalez can now understand these lists on her own.

"It's a win-win situation, because we're helping them, but they're also helping us now, too," Saracco said.

Gonzalez and Saracco are currently reading "Charlotte's Web" together, and Gonzalez has even written essays about her experience in the ESL program, and a recent trip to Oaxaca, Mexico.

Saracco, who taught elementary school in Hawaii and college-level English at a military base, forms her own lesson plans, based on what Gonzalez wants to learn. She said volunteering for this program was "right up her alley."

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Gonzalez has read Michelle Obama's book "Becoming" in Spanish and has a goal of eventually being able to read it in **English** as well. She also wants to take classes in American Sign Language at a community college.

The tutoring program started as an idea by someone who understood the difficulty of learning **English**, resident Wai Moy, a Chinese **immigrant** herself. She came to America at the age of 13, and was first placed in a kindergarten class, because she couldn't understand any **English**.

In her career, she went on to become an engineer and earned two master's degrees. She became an ESL tutor herself some 30 years ago in New York. But back then, tutors had to create their own books - cut out their own pictures from a magazine and have students identify them.

Moy also tutored at the Pleasanton Public Library through their literacy program. When she heard that some Stoneridge Creek residents were having difficulty understanding some staff members who didn't speak **English** well, she had an idea: Offer **English** as a Second Language classes at the retirement community itself, with residents as the volunteers.

She gathered other residents who became the core of her committee: Maryanne Silber, who taught ESL in London and also did private ESL tutoring for people in Silicon Valley companies, and Julia Casamajor, a retired librarian with the Livermore Public Library who also has taught ESL lessons. They also have a pilot in their midst, Al Baer, who helps with gathering statistics for their programming.

The Pleasanton Library agreed to not only provide some teaching materials, but also training sessions for their tutors as well, said Lori Carducci, a library assistant.

"What's really been impressive to me is the way this program has taken off on the shoulders of those volunteers," Carducci said. "It's been delightful for us to see, because we can expand our program and expand our reach."

Stoneridge Creek itself got on board, agreeing to let employees not only take the one hour off once a week for the lessons, but also paying them for that time.

The 21 students currently enrolled in the classes work in various departments at the senior community - housekeeping, kitchen, plant operations and custodial. Students speak a variety of languages as their native tongue: Spanish, Cantonese, Farsi, Mong, Tagalog are represented, with 20 volunteers so far tutoring them.

"I think the most important thing is having a chance to speak in **English** for a sustained period of time. All employees have someone on their staff, who works with them that speaks their same language. So they can get by leaning on each other," Casamajor said.

The goal, much like Gonzalez's situation, is to be able to get them to become self-sufficient.

On the other hand for residents, it gives them a chance to contribute in a concrete way, especially for those who aren't able to go to the Pleasanton Library, Silber said.

"It makes for a better community," Silber said.

Saracco said she sees that her student is gaining confidence, too.

"I am not only learning **English**, but residents are teaching me life; they're teaching me how to live better. And this for me, is beautiful," Gonzalez said.

[Pleasanton Library's literacy program](#), which currently has 201 active students, and 75 on the waiting list, is looking for tutors. For more information, contact the literacy program at 925-931-3405 or literacy@cityofpleasantonca.gov.

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