

Durham nonprofits make educational programs accessible for immigrants

By Veronica Correa

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When Durham mother of two Ana Sanchez started taking her son Leo to the Durham County Library 10 years ago, it was a struggle to get the kindergartner to enjoy reading.

Today the fourth-grader can read at grade level with the help of weekly tutoring.

“It really helps the kids open their minds,” Sanchez said in Spanish.

The Sanchez family is one of many who benefit from the Durham County Library’s educational resources. Hispanic Services Coordinator Monica Belford organizes a number of bilingual literacy and tutoring programs. In addition to in-library events, children have access to a number of entertaining and informative online resources. Through a partnership with Durham Public Schools, students can check out books using their student ID number.

“The kids learn to like coming to the library,” Belford said. “They make it a habit.”

Belford aims to help children and adults learn how to use all of the electronic resources that Durham County Library provides.

Sanchez said being able to use the library computers was important because she did not have internet at home when she first moved to Durham.

The library also helps older children apply to various magnet schools. Sanchez’s daughter Kimberly is hoping to attend Durham Tech’s Middle College High School and pursue her dream of being an engineer.

There are only four library staffers who speak Spanish, but Belford hopes to increase that number in the future. She also hopes to update the Spanish version of the library website as she believes it should be more comprehensive. She is working with the library system to make all of its resources accessible in every location, including the MakerLab in Northgate Mall.

“We’re working on getting tutoring to be more uniform across all the libraries,” she said.

Durham County Library does not work alone to help the immigrant community. It achieves its mission of supporting the Latino community by communicating with other local organizations such as El Centro Hispano in Lakewood Shopping



Durham County Library Hispanic Services Coordinator and Durham mother Ana Sanchez meet up at the MakerLab in Northgate Mall. Durham County Library is one organization in Durham that provides bilingual educational programs for the growing Latino community. (Staff photo by Veronica Correa)

Center. Both of these organizations focus on reaching out to people of all ages.

“El Centro has something for everyone,” said Education Program Manager Antonio Alanís.

Alanís moved to Durham from Texas 18 years ago and has seen the Latino community grow exponentially during his time here. He said he connects his work with his own upbringing. El Centro’s tutoring services for younger children focus on performing at grade level and promoting cultural pride and understanding.

“Everything that I do is culturally relevant, especially in my preschool,” he said.

One of El Centro’s newest endeavors is the Highset program, which provides GED tutoring for people interested in vocational careers. Alanís said Highset currently has 25 registered students and

has been successful so far. El Centro is also working to provide online educational services so people who don’t have access to a car can still make the most out of El Centro.

“We really want the best for our community,” he said. “We really take the extra effort for them to come.”

While El Centro offers a broad range of classes for English language learners, it doesn’t stop there. It offers Spanish classes for native English speakers to promote cross-cultural engagement. For Alanís, this initiative is important because he believes native Spanish speakers shouldn’t be the only ones making the effort to learn another language.

“It’s a two-way responsibility as I see it,” he said. “In those Spanish classes, we give people a chance to learn who we are as a culture.”