

https://www.santafenewmexican.com/news/local_news/literacy-volunteers-of-santa-fe-celebrates-35-years/article_d0a06658-4930-11eb-844d-275a9f668c96.html

Literacy Volunteers of Santa Fe celebrates 35 years

By Dillon Mullan dmullan@sfnewmexican.com

Jan 9, 2021



April Little, a Literacy Volunteers of Santa Fe student, is working toward her GED diploma so she can attend community college. When she first arrived, she just wanted to be able to fill out a job application.

Luis Sánchez Saturno/The New Mexican

More info

To learn more about Literacy Volunteers of Santa Fe, visit lvsf.org or call 505-428-1353.

At 13, April Little was unable to spell her name.

A decade later, she saw an ad on TV for free tutoring and went to Santa Fe Community College with the goal of learning how to apply for work.

“I couldn’t even fill out job applications, so I wasn’t even able to attempt to get employment,” said Little, now 27 and a supervisor in the meat department at Market Street. “When ordering off a menu, I used to always just say, ‘Get me what you’re getting.’”

Literacy Volunteers of Santa Fe teaches adults like Little to read and write in English. The nonprofit, now celebrating its 35th anniversary, has helped some 40,000 students with parenting, promotions, citizenship and any other pursuit previously blocked by a lack of understanding.

The nonprofit, which also has trained roughly 5,000 tutors over the years, offers free programs in basic literacy, English as a second language and preparation for the U.S. citizenship test. It is housed at Santa Fe Community College but also sends tutors to workplaces, parks and the county jail.

“Taking college classes in your second language is complicated,” Haydee Gonzalez, a Guatemalan studying early childhood education at Santa Fe Community College, said in Spanish. “I’m not sure I could have reached this level of English without the program. When I need help, I still call my old tutors.”

During the pandemic, English as a second language coordinator Amanda Rivera de Garcia said students, who typically meet in small groups or one on one, have practiced English over video calls, the telephone and text messages. Enrollment is down from around 400 to 320 at the start of the year.

“In a nonpandemic setting, we have a long waitlist. I try to play a big matching game between students and tutors to find what works,” Rivera de Garcia said. “We meet at the college or work or closer to home.”

Last fiscal year, 20 students passed the U.S. citizenship test, which is mostly oral and part of a sometimes-confusing process with a 22-page application form.

“With the questions on civics and government, I would guess eight of 10 U.S.-born citizens couldn’t pass it,” said Gary Dellapa, one of the organization’s tutors. “We can prepare for the content of the test, but filling out the application and taking a formal test in another language is really intimidating.”

Dellapa said around 90 percent of his students passed the test on the first try and all have by the second.

Nivia Rojo de Ochoa, who is from Chihuahua, Mexico, started taking English classes through the program 10 years ago to keep up with her two sons. She passed the citizenship test in 2019.

“I walked out sure I knew the answers to those questions,” Rojo de Ochoa said in Spanish. “It’s not easy to be here in the United States without much English.”

Little said she is studying for the GED diploma so she can enroll in the community college's automotive engineering program to become a mechanic.

"Options I never thought would have been possible, never thought I would be able to have the job I have now," Little said. "I never saw myself having employment that wasn't under the table."

Dillon Mullan

Reporter