

Dominicans launch literacy center for immigrant women

By [Scott Reeder](#)



PHOTO BY STEVE HINRICHS

Student Ama Marie Gonzalo, left, with her teacher, Janette Parra.

Ana Manriquez came to the United States from Mexico 24 years ago seeking a better life for herself and her family.

During the past two decades she has seen her career transform from cleaning hotel rooms to owning her own business. But in September she took a new step: taking English classes.

"In immigrant families, we have found that it is often the mother who is the last to learn English," said Sister Katherine O'Connor, a member of the Dominican Sisters of Springfield.

O'Connor, who served as president of Sacred Heart-Griffin High School for 18 years, has taken on a new mission along with her colleague, Sister Ann Clennon. They have begun a program to teach English to immigrant women in Springfield.

The inaugural class of the Dominican Literacy Center launched in September with 17 students and 17 tutors. The center is located in what was once the rectory for chaplains serving SHG, a brick house behind the high school.

"Our program is set up only for women. And the reason for that is that in the family structure, the mother is often the last one to learn English," Clennon said. "The father has a lot more opportunities and exposure to English. The kids learn English very quickly in school. And the mother, her job is to retain the native language for the family. But (that means) then she also does not enjoy a position of authority in the family because she doesn't understand everything that's going on."

Clennon led a similar program in Aurora.

"I had 20 years doing this in Aurora," she said. "I was asked if I would consider starting a program here. And, because Sister Katherine was finishing with her position (at SHG), and God forbid she should just collect dust, she was asked if we could work together."

Clennon said Springfield differs from Aurora in that the immigrant community is less visible.

"The immigrant community here is very much in the shadows. And so people living their everyday life here wouldn't necessarily know that there are immigrants here, but there are pockets of them all over the city of Springfield," she said. "They are trying to eke out a living just like everybody else and become part of the community and contribute to the community if they possibly can."

Manriquez has worked in the Springfield community in a variety of capacities ranging from being a housekeeper and a barista to a small business owner. Today she owns Ana's New Look, a hair salon at 1275 Wabash Ave. in Jerome.

Although Manriquez speaks relatively fluent English, she enrolled in the literacy program because she wants to improve.

"I don't want to sound rude, but I had to start from the bottom because I could not speak English," she said. "I started cleaning rooms. I was a housekeeper in the Hilton hotel. I lasted there only six or seven months because that was a hard job."

Next, she worked at coffee shops in White Oaks Mall and at Springfield Memorial Hospital.

"I just repeated whatever they ordered. I didn't have to have conversations with clients," she said. While working in the hospital coffee shop she met a Dominican sister who invited her to work in their motherhouse.

"While I worked there, I went to school and studied cosmetology and was raising my kids at the same time," she said. Both of her daughters have graduated from SHG. One has become a Springfield police officer and the other lives in California.

"I was so busy working or going to school that I did not have time to take an English class," she said.

Manriquez said language barriers were especially frustrating when she was forced to use her then-young children as interpreters.

"A lot of times (kids) translate when you have a doctor's appointment," she said. "You know, the vocabulary that you use in a doctor appointment is not the same that you use in regular conversation when children are little. It's frustrating because you really cannot tell the doctor how you feel or any concerns because (children) really don't have the experience to translate that."

Sister Clennon said medical appointments and parent-teacher conferences are two of the most difficult routine encounters for immigrant mothers because so often they are reliant on their children to translate.

Molly Parker, a retired state worker, is a tutor in the program. She said the reason immigrant women are often the last to learn English is straightforward.

"Sometimes they have the women stay home with the children while the men work because they can't afford child care, or they don't have child care in Spanish or they may not have work visas."

Sister O'Connor said they never inquire about the immigration status of the students.

Clennon added, "People would not make this drastic move (to the U.S.) if they didn't have to. There was something compelling them to come here. Otherwise, they would stay in their own country."