

# ADULT LEARNING CENTER PROVIDES EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

Samila Frattasio arrived in America four years ago knowing only the most basic of English words – hello, goodbye and thank you - or just enough to communicate with her husband. The Cape Verdean immigrant got a job at Costco and listened intently to the cadences of English banter around her, but she was still unable to converse with co-workers or customers. Then she enrolled in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses at the Adult Learning Center, the Brockton Public Schools program that provides educational programming for adults at the Paine School.



Today, Samila smiles when she greets her customers and she chats up her co-workers at every opportunity. She and her husband converse on any number of topics, sharing their thoughts and dreams in English. In just a few short years, Samila has mastered English, is well on her way to earning a GED, and is looking to advance her career in her adopted country, and she thanks her instructors for being there for her every step of the way.

“The teachers help us for anything we need with school work but also if we have a problem outside school,” Samila said. “The teachers are like family; they care about us.”

Founded in 1973, the Adult Learning Center is supported by a Department of Elementary and Secondary Education grant and Brockton Public Schools funding. The ALC offers basic literacy courses in reading and mathematics to a 9<sup>th</sup> grade level, GED preparation, English for Speakers of Other Languages instruction, and Citizenship preparation classes to Brockton area adults. The ALC also offers Family Literacy classes which are geared toward ESOL students who have children in the Brockton Public Schools. The center also provides computer courses and counseling services.



“The Adult Learning Center is a comprehensive program that educates adults in academics and also helps them to become active and engaged participants in the community,” said Coordinator Suzanne Martin. “We teach people of all levels of ability and experiences. Some English language learners never had an opportunity to attend school, while others have advanced credentials from other countries. The GED and basic skills

learners have returned to school for a variety of reasons and with a variety of previous school experiences. The ALC students are a group of motivated, dedicated people who want to increase their skills to be better able to contribute to and participate in their community. Their goals include helping their children succeed in school, improving their employment opportunities, and completing job training, and completing advanced certificate or college degree programs. The Brockton Public Schools Adult Learning Program offers them the basic skills to pursue these goals.”

In January, the Center held its second annual Special Sessions program: two days of elective seminars that educated students about credit and checking accounts, tax preparation, recognizing signs of gang involvement in children, immigration law, and relevant health areas like diabetes education and blood pressure checks. “The goal of the program is to provide participants with additional information or service referrals that may help them in the community”, Martin said.

“The students in the program helped design the schedule by identifying areas where they felt they needed more information and education. These are issues that are affecting our families. Brockton has been especially hard hit by the credit crisis and many of our students want to talk about the implications of credit debt. The increase in gang involvement of our young people has been in the news lately and parents are concerned for their children. The students specifically requested the diabetes education session because that is a health concern for many of our students,” Martin said.



In one seminar, Elaine Reiser, Executive Director of Brockton Area Multi Services, Inc.’s HelpLine, explained the benefits of the telephone referral system that helps local residents access healthcare, fuel assistance, food stamps and other social services. Down the hall, Peggy Pochay, a Registered Dietician at Caritas Good Samaritan Medical Center was explaining the symptoms and treatment of Type II Diabetes. In another seminar room, UMass Extension Nutrition Educator Andrea Gulezian discussed healthy nutrition and how to read food labels, while Attorney Ben Jaffee of South Coastal Counties Legal Services Inc. held a question and answer session about immigration. Carla Fogaren,



Director of Interpreter Services at Caritas Good Samaritan, organized a staff of nurses and technicians to provide a blood pressure clinic for all the ALC students.

“This program is a wonderful way to connect our students with the services available in the community. The students are well served through this program,” said Adult Learning

Center Assistant Director Kathy Quinn. “The goal is to help students educate themselves.”

Angelina Nunes’ “Credit and Checking Accounts” seminar was a big draw for the adult participants. In her 90-minute workshop, the Coordinator of HarborOne Credit Union’s Multicultural Center helped students design a simple budget for household expenses and discussed the differences in checking, flexible spending and savings accounts. Nunes also gave students information on how to plan for a child’s college, basic steps to consider when purchasing a home, and how to avoid the pitfalls of credit cards.



“These are lessons that all students need, no matter what their age,” said Community Schools Director Kathleen Smith, who oversees the Adult Learning Center. “I am always impressed with the way the Adult Learning Center staff members go out of their way to help their students, both academically and in the community.”

The Adult Learning Center is often a first stop for new immigrants looking to learn English or for high school drop-outs seeking a high school diploma. Funded by \$1.3 million in local school funds and state and federal grants, the center provides free programming to 600 Brockton-area adults and currently maintains a waiting list of 1,700 adults. The wait for GED classes can be as short as three months, while English language learners might wait a year or more.

Gilberto Mendes came to the United States 20 years ago from Angola and found that his limited English skills were a barrier to workplace success. Since he began taking ESOL courses at the Adult Learning Center five years ago, he has completed the English Language Classes and is preparing for the GED test. His employer promoted him to a managerial position, thanks to his improved communications skills.



“It has been great for me – now I can speak better English, I can read and write in English, and that is what got me a promotion at my job,” Mendes said. “This program helped me to communicate at work, and now I can help my children with their homework and take my father to his doctor’s appointments and understand what is being said.”

Mendes and his family speak Creole at home, and his young daughter was growing up without the ability to speak English. So Mendes enrolled her in the ALC’s preschool

program while he was taking ESOL classes, and his daughter learned to speak English fluently. By the time the little girl entered kindergarten, she was placed in a regular education English speaking classroom.

“It is great to be a student here, because everybody wants to learn,” Mendes said. “We value our education.”

