

Wednesday, Jan. 28, 2009

Communicating means connecting

While some Wheaton merchants say they can get by without learning English or Spanish, others find value in language lessons

by Amber Parcher | Staff Writer

Javier Herrera works 60 hours a week as a chef at El Pulgarcito Del Callao, a Peruvian seafood restaurant on Elkin Street in Wheaton. The Peruvian immigrant has spoken mostly Spanish—to his co-workers, boss and most of the restaurant's patrons—on a daily basis for the past decade.

Herrera knows he could probably spend the rest of his life in America with only a minimal understanding of English. But he has bigger plans, and so the middle-aged worker set out to learn English at Montgomery College by taking a two-hour class every weekday before 9 a.m.

"Restaurants [that] have the most success speak English," he said in a mix of Spanish and English. "To take a step ahead and work better, it's important."

Herrera, who said he hopes to work in a bigger, busier restaurant one day, is one of about 125,000 residents in Montgomery County with a limited proficiency of English, according to 2007 census data. Almost half of that number consists of Spanish speakers.

And if the free Saturday English class at the Gilchrist Center for Cultural Diversity in Wheaton is any indication, thousands of them are trying to improve their language skills. Martiza Rivera Cohen, the director of the center, which promotes multicultural awareness in Montgomery County, said the class has about 100 people every week.

"The demand for English is huge," she said, adding the center and other language programs are barely "scratching the surface" to provide English lessons to everyone who wants them.

Experts say learning English is the No. 1 way immigrants can improve their standard of living in America. Rachel Glass, the director of the nonprofit Montgomery Coalition for English Literacy, a group of providers of adult English literacy programs in the county, cites research that says being proficient in English is the equivalent of a high school diploma, almost doubling a worker's hourly wage.

"It's absolutely central," Glass said of the need to know English to succeed in America.

But some residents in the Silver Spring and Wheaton area say communication is a two-way street.

A community such as the heavily Latino populated Wheaton will benefit from having English speakers learn Spanish, said Rayness Mayne, a resident of Silver Spring and a native English speaker.

"The word now is 'global.' One language is hardly the way to go," said Mayne, who is taking Spanish classes at the Gilchrist Center to be able to communicate with the Spanish speakers she runs into every day.

One of her classmates, Frank O'Donnell, said he's breaking down cultural and language barriers by learning a language so many of his neighbors in the Forest Glen area of Silver Spring speak.

"So much does go on in our society in Spanish," he said.

Eddie Velasquez, the owner of DeJaBel Café on University Boulevard in Wheaton, is fluent in both languages. He said learning just a few words of Spanish can change someone's perception of the entire culture.

"Maybe you'll see something more to ... being Hispanic," he said. "Instead of, 'Oh, there's an immigrant. Oh, there's a gangster.'"

But while learning another language is optional for English speakers, learning English is necessary for immigrants, stressed Fillipo Leo, the owner of Marchone's Italian Deli on Triangle Lane in Wheaton. Leo, who speaks four languages, said it's advantageous in business to know more than one language but he encourages his mostly Spanish-speaking workers to learn English.

Lourides Tejeda, a cashier at Marchone's and an immigrant from Honduras, is doing just that. She is one of the hundred who attend an English class at Gilchrist on the weekends when she has time, she added.

"English is different, it's difficult," she said.

Time is something Yessenia R., a worker at Irene's Pupusas on University Boulevard in Wheaton who declined to give her full last name, said she doesn't have to spare. Even if she did have time to take classes, Yessenia said she rarely uses English in her day-to-day life, even at her job.

But Moshe Briel, the president of the Wheaton & Kensington Chamber of Commerce said that's not an excuse. To learn English, people need to get out of their comfort zone and have the will to change the channel from Spanish to English, said Briel who is starting up a full immersion English class in Wheaton on his own time.

"In terms of finding the opportunities, they're there," he said. "It's a question of discipline."

As he moves onto the advanced-level classes at Montgomery College, Herrera said he couldn't agree more. With the economy struggling and many businesses like his own slowing down, Herrera said he thinks immigrants should jump at the chance to take English classes.

"Now is the time," he said.