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Volunteers Help Housekeeping Staff Learn English

By Rich McManus

They say charity begins at home, but it can also take root in the workplace, as NIAID's Maria G. Hessie has proven by establishing lunch-hour classes to help NIH's foreign-born housekeepers learn English.

A native of Mexico and 11-year NIH veteran, Hessie was approached in 2006 by a housekeeper who asked for help learning English. Hessie agreed to tutor the woman, but on the day they were to meet for their initial session, the housekeeper showed up with five other housekeepers, all Hispanic, most from El Salvador. Two years later, Hessie's tutoring program had a name—Volunteer Program for English Proficiency (VPEP)—and now attracts 45-50 students taught year-round by a growing cadre of volunteer teachers who meet in Bldgs. 10 and 31.

"I started it because it is necessary to help others," said Hessie, a program specialist in the Laboratory of Immunology who came to the U.S. from Mexico 20 years ago. Because of her background, she sympathizes deeply with the plight of poor immigrants. "I felt I needed to do something."

Hessie was moved by her first student's desperation to learn and conversed with her, at first, only in Spanish. "She came to me almost crying. She was sad, disappointed and depressed. She said she needed to make a better life for her family."

Hessie first advised her to go to school, but the woman pleaded that she had no time. "Then I will help you," Hessie decided. Hessie still recalls the date she committed to teach. "It was Oct. 23, 2006, a Monday. We made a date for Wednesday at lunch. I thought she wasn't coming back, because I was pushing her. But she came back with five other students."

Hessie was unprepared with both space and materials and wandered the halls of the CRC until she found an empty room. "We struggled to look for a place to [hold class], but my colleague Karen Murphy helped us find space. She, along with Mary Hash and Suzanne Grefsheim [both of the NIH Library], helped us relocate to a room in the basement of the Bldg. 10 library in November 2006."

Her boss, Dr. Michael Lenardo, was also supportive. "When I mentioned my plan to him, he was impressed and glad with the idea," she said. "He has been a great supporter since then." Hessie had never taught anyone before—"just my sons. I wasn't a teacher." But she felt a natural empathy for her students.

To imagine a curriculum, Hessie said, "I put myself in their position. What is most necessary for adults to know?" For the first year and a half, she met her class of six Monday through Friday, but eventually gave the students Fridays off so that they could eat lunch with their friends.

There was no formal textbook during this period, but last January Hessie acquired some books. As

*VPEP
founder
Maria G.
Hessie
(c) is
flanked
by
Giovanna
Guerrero
(l) of
NINDS
and
Rebecca
Marci
Brown of
NCI.*

news of the class spread by word of mouth, more housekeepers joined. Most are Hispanic, but some are Haitian and speak French/Creole. Only English is spoken in the classroom, however, since VPEP is an English-immersion program.

Hessie has now divided her students into two tracks, low-beginner and high-beginner. Her first six students are still enrolled today, although all had hiatuses in the past 2 years. Most enroll in order to improve their prospects for better jobs.

“All of our teaching is done in groups, and the students correct one another,” said Rebecca Marci Brown, a Presidential Management fellow at NCI who joined VPEP in December 2008. Through her association with Young Government Leaders of Bethesda, Brown has recruited new volunteer teachers to VPEP.

Another key recruit for Hessie’s program was Jeanette Contreras, an NCI policy analyst she befriended last summer. Contreras had experience recruiting Hispanic high schoolers to consider careers in science. She, along with colleagues Weston Ricks, an NCI budget analyst, and Giovanna Guerrero, a science policy analyst at NINDS, began volunteering at VPEP last summer.

Contreras’ and Guerrero’s links to NIH’s Hispanic

Employee Organization, and to fellow alumni of the Emerging Leaders Program and the larger intern community at NIH, have been useful in recruiting new teachers.

Ironically, VPEP was the accidental by-product of a failed attempt by Hessie to conduct outreach to the local Hispanic school-age population.

“I had been involved in recruiting blacks, women, people with disabilities and Hispanics to NIH as a member of an NIAID advisory committee,” she explains. She had hoped to conduct outreach talks at local high schools with large Hispanic enrollment, but her proposal was rejected on grounds that the kids she was targeting typically don’t speak English. She then realized that her most fertile client base was right under her nose.

Hessie is deeply moved by the gratitude of her students. “They are so appreciative,” she says. And she is passionate about their ability to better themselves, both socially and economically.

“Our classes also focus on self-confidence, looking people in the eye and speaking loudly enough to be heard,” says Brown, who notes that health literacy, too, is an important part of the VPEP curriculum. Adds Contreras, “Some of these people haven’t been in a classroom for 20-25 years, so we need to remember that. With our most basic students, we often start out with pictures instead of words.”

As VPEP has gathered momentum, Contreras realized that it needed a more formal curriculum and structure, in addition to resources such as textbooks. Last fall, she led the drafting of a grant proposal. Early this year, Brown, through her association with R&W President Randy Schools, successfully helped VPEP win a grant from the Montgomery Coalition for Adult English Literacy. The grant will be used to acquire textbooks, conduct student and teacher assessment, help train volunteers and do community outreach.

“We hope our program will be a model,” says Contreras, adding that VPEP volunteer teachers are preparing a handbook for other agencies to use in building their own English as a second language programs.




Sandeep Nair (l) of NINDS, who recently joined VPEP as a tutor, and NCI’s Jeanette Contreras teach a class in Bldg. 31.

Brown says other agencies, including HRSA, have expressed interest in hosting programs similar to VPEP. Hessie says she has also had inquiries from private industry.

Contreras hopes to import VPEP to Bldg. 37 or Executive Blvd., where there are high concentrations of prospective students and NIH staff who could volunteer. “But we don’t want to grow too quickly,” she cautions.

Hessie says VPEP classes are open to all, but students must be in nonprofessional or non-scientific jobs. “Professionals can go to FAES classes, and can pay. Our clients can’t pay.”

But that’s not to say that VPEP faculty don’t profit. “They hug us and thank us,” says Brown. “They are an incredibly thoughtful and respectful group of people.” She adds that students’ gratitude “is often the silver lining of our week. Being around people who are sacrificing so much is very inspiring. It puts things into perspective, especially after a difficult day. It’s energizing to be around them.”

Hessie agrees that meeting her students relieves the stress of her NIH job. She welcomes inquiries from NIH’ers interested in joining VPEP and can be reached at (301) 496-3981. 

VPEP classes are held weekly, Monday-Thursday from 11:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., in Bldg. 31 and in the basement of Bldg. 10’s NIH Library. The program hopes to recruit new volunteers so it can expand to other buildings on campus and at other NIH sites. Volunteer instructors do not need to have teaching experience or know another language. All teaching materials and training will be provided. The only requirement is a commitment to teach class during one lunch period every week. If interested, contact Giovanna Guerrero (guerrerog@mail.nih.gov) for more information.