

a Fresh start

*Cambridge's Community
Learning Center helps
residents learn English,
earn a high school
diploma and pass the GED*

BY LEIGH HORNBECK
Chronicle Staff

Last Thursday morning, a small room in the Community Learning Center on Brookline Avenue filled with the accents and hesitant English of immigrants from five different countries.

The dozen students were gathered for the common goal of learning the native tongue of their adopted country. On this particular morning, the English for Speakers of Other Languages students worked in pairs, asking one another what they like to do when it is cold outside, or warm, snowy or sunny.

It's been less than a year since many traveled to the United States from far-flung home-

lands of Korea, Ukraine, Ethiopia, Portugal and Haiti.

Muhammad Khalid remembers what it was like to sit in that classroom, struggling to learn English. In 1990, he left behind his wife and children in Pakistan because of what he calls "financial difficulty," and came to the U.S. He first enrolled in ESOL classes in 1994 at the Learning Center, then worked his way through the adult diploma program.

In January, he finished the center's Bridge program, designed to help with college preparation. In September, he will start classes at Bunker Hill Community College, where he hopes to eventually earn a degree

in electronics.

Meanwhile, he works in the stock room at the Tannery, a Harvard Square shoe store, and sends money home to his family. The money allows his children, aged 5 to 15, to attend better schools. Someday, he hopes they will be able to move to the U.S. and finish their education here.

Being apart from his family is very hard. Khalid said in an interview from his apartment in the Fresh Pond Apartments, but providing them with a better life is what keeps him going.

"What I lose in my life, I hope they can achieve because of my help," Khalid said.

Khalid is one of 1,200 students to benefit from the free classes offered to Cambridge residents at the Community Learning Center last year. At graduation exercises in June, 25 adults were honored for finishing the five levels of ESOL offered at the center, 20 received graduate equivalency degrees, 22 received high school diplomas from the Cambridge Rindge and Latin School and 12 graduated from the Bridge college readiness program.

According to Nina Ready, the director of the Learning Center, 80 percent of the students last year were immigrants and 66 percent were women. More than half were employed. Although people ranging from 16 to 80 years old use the center, the majority are aged 25 to 50. They either hear about the center through friends or pick up fliers handed out by the housing authority and the city's schools.

The city funds about one third of the center's expenses. The rest comes from competitive grants, the Department of Education and private fund raising. The center is staffed by 25 full-time teachers and 30 to 40 part-time teachers.

Debra Sakriba, 42, earned a Cambridge Rindge and Latin diploma through the Learning Center in the spring. She described graduation as the best night of her life, aside from giving birth to her children.

"I was on cloud nine for weeks, it was amazing," said Sakriba, who also received a \$1,000 scholarship.

Sakriba, a worker at a Charlestown day care, said she had lied about having a high school diploma when she applied for her job. Later, co-workers kept asking her why she didn't take the necessary college classes to become qualified as a teacher.

"I kept making excuses, [eventually] I thought if I was ever going to get anywhere, first I had to get my diploma," Sakriba said.

A young teen-ager in South Boston during the time busing was introduced to Boston in the '70s, Sakriba said she was scared to attend school. Add that to a bit of teen-age rebelliousness, and Sakriba said she was ready to drop out of school. When her younger sister repeatedly came home beaten up, her father pulled her out as well.

Sakriba always had planned to go back to school. But she had children and turned her attention to raising them.

"I got to the point when my children were grown and I wanted to focus on me; it was my time," Sakriba said.

At first, she only told her husband and planned to keep the classes a secret from her three sons. She envisioned graduation day arriving and subtly mentioning to her children: If you don't have anything to do tonight, maybe you would like to see your mother get her high school diploma.

She's not very good at keeping it quiet though, Sakriba said, and eventually her secret was out.

Sakriba tested out of math and English classes, but high school transcripts showed she'd never passed history. Every Tuesday night after working all day, she attended an hour-and-a-half-long class. Though she was tired sometimes, she said the group of people and her teacher made class work fun. With that behind her, she's already looking toward the future.

While walking to the corner of her street to catch the bus to class, she saw an ad in a window for free biomedical training, offered by Just-A-Start. Although Sakriba originally thought she would like to be a teacher, she is interested in the training.

If she is accepted to the program, Sakriba said she will give her scholarship back to the Community Learning Center to award to another student.

Susanna Castillo is part of the 80 percent of students at the Learning Center who studied English as a second language last year.

Castillo, 65, waited almost 30 years before taking English-language classes. She could speak English "well enough to defend myself," after immigrating to the U.S. from Honduras in 1971 in her mid-30s, but she lacked confidence in her writing and grammar skills, she said.

When she first arrived in the U.S., there was no time to further her education. With children living with family members in Honduras, she went to work as a live-in maid in Boston and sent money back home to support them. Eventually, her children moved to the U.S. and Castillo married an American citizen. They had two more children, who are now in their 20s. They are all proud, she said, of their mother's improvement.

Despite finishing the ESOL program, Castillo said she still struggles with spelling and grammar. In September, she plans to enroll in GED-preparation classes.

"I'm not giving up," Castillo said. Leigh K. Lyons signed up at the Learning Center to take GED-preparation classes because counselor Marjorie Jacobs was so friendly and helpful when Lyons called for information.

"I felt like they would prepare me not only to pass the GED but for college, too," Lyons said.

Lyons, 34, didn't want to return to waitressing and bartending when her children entered day care this year. Instead, she hoped to earn her GED and start college. In June, after passing the test, the Learning Center awarded her a \$1,000 scholarship to use toward criminal psychology

classes at the University of Massachusetts, which she plans to start in January 2001.

In the meantime, she will keep working and taking a writing and vocabulary class. She's also helping Jacobs teach a stress management class.

Jacobs is one of the "founding mothers" of the Learning Center; she started teaching in September, 1972. She has been a counselor for 20 years and has been the program manager for the GED preparation classes.

Through the years, Jacobs has helped students not only handle what she calls a "stress-filled society," but also learn how to study, set realistic goals and juggle family and work responsibilities with furthering their education.

Low self-esteem is common, Jacobs said. The low-level students especially need a great deal of support and encouragement to overcome the

barriers to learning that affected them as young people.

"They've forgotten, but the same problems come back now that they are sitting in a class again," Jacobs said.

Though Jacobs has seen more and more second-language students working to get their GED, the majority of her students in the last five years have been English-speaking Americans under the age of 21, she said, usually drop-outs around the age of 16 or 17. Although younger students have the potential to learn faster, they are also less likely to sit quietly in class and maintain good attendance. As a result, Jacobs has to teach at a slower pace than before.

She expects the trend to continue as the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System tests prevent high school students from earning a diploma. As of 2003, every high school graduate in the commonwealth must pass the MCAS in order to receive a diploma.

Although it is quieter around the Learning Center in the summer than during the school year, classes like the second-level ESOL group meet regularly through the hot days, attending class about six hours a week. According to Ready, the waiting list for ESOL is months-long.

Teacher Teresa Brown played a tape of a weather forecast and joked with one student, "when he says 'the Cape,' does he mean Cape Verde?"

She quizzes Ashebir Gezmo on where he likes to listen to his walkman, which is in the pocket of his cargo pants.

Gezmo, a steward at a hotel in Cambridge, came to the states seven months ago from Ethiopia after winning a green card lottery. He is learning English quickly, Gezmo said smiling. It was hard at first, but now his self-confidence is growing.

Friends of the Community Learning Center
19 Brookline Street
Cambridge MA 02139

August 11, 2000

Mayor Galluccio and City Councillors
City of Cambridge
City Hall
Cambridge, MA 02139

Dear Councillors,

We would like to call your attention to an excellent article in the August 9, 2000 Cambridge Chronicle entitled ***A Fresh Start***, copy enclosed. It is an excellent portrayal of the work and successes of the Community Learning Center. Leigh Hornbeck certainly captures the commitment of the students and the effect CLC has on their lives. She also correctly recognizes the dedication of the faculty.

However, she missed one very significant part of the story. The CLC delivers nationally recognized results to its 1200 students in what can, at the very best, be termed sub-standard conditions. No other school in our city has classrooms in which the students are crammed into less than 10 square feet per student. The classrooms have no teachers' desks and teachers are unable to walk around their classrooms to help individual students. Heating and air-conditioning are intermittent. The teachers' lunchroom doubles as conference room and copy center. The bathrooms double as storage areas.

The Department of Education has recognized this program as one of the ten best in the country. The Massachusetts Department of Education recognized the work of Mina Reddy and her staff and students by awarding CLC the largest adult education grant in the state. It is time Cambridge met its responsibility and provided adequate facilities for this program. We ask you to work with the City Manager now to find adequate facilities for the teachers and students of CLC.

Sincerely yours,



Deborah Lerne Goodman
President



Tomás Guillermo
Vice-President



Robert Wolf
Treasurer

cc City Clerk

Consnet Communicaiton #7

8277

A communication was received from
the Friends of Community Learning
Center, relative to an article
entitled "A Fresh Start."

In City Council September 11, 2000

PLACED ON FILE