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Program funded by Gillette helps workers learn English, job skills

By BILL KIRK
BUSINESS EDITOR

LA WRENCE — It's never easy to ask your boss for a raise. But if you don't know English, it's even harder.

That's where the Notre Dame Education Center comes in.

Nearly every day during the school year, students representing 34 different countries from around the world — who now live in Lawrence — fill the brightly lit classrooms in a converted mill building on Merrimack Street to study English, learn computer skills and, in some cases, pick up medical training.

"These people have the same dreams as everyone else," said Sister Gwynette Proctor, executive director of the center, located at 354 Merrimack St. "Our curriculum is student-driven — so they can interact with their English-speaking coworkers at lunch, so they can read job postings on the bulletin board, so they can make sure their paychecks are right. This is what we want to do here."

On its face, the program is like many English-for-Speakers-of-Other Language (ESOL) programs offered around the city. But there's a key difference in that much of the funding for Notre Dame's popular program comes from Gillette-Procter & Gamble.

The reason? During certain times of year, dozens of people from Lawrence

pile into vans and head down to the Devens Commerce Center to work at a packaging plant owned by a company called Sonoco Packaging Services, where they prepare Gillette razors for shipment around the country.

In 2005, the Merrimack Valley Project was looking for a way to get people off the citywide 1,000-person waiting list for ESOL programs, so the agency approached Gillette, according to the agency's staff director, Loren McArthur. The company eventually agreed to pay \$500,000 toward a three-year program at Notre Dame to help train some of the people who work at Sonoco as well as others in need of English classes and career training.

The first class of 100 students graduated earlier this month in a ceremony attended by friends, family members and well-wishers, as well as politicians and representatives of Gillette. When the company's commitment ends two years from now, some 300 people will have picked up language and career skills they need to succeed in their careers and in life — without spending any of their own money.



ANGIE BEAULIEU/Staff photo

ESL instructor RickaMae Birnbaum, right, makes Ramon Irizarry, 11, center, feel shy as she explains that just as he came out to support his mother as she receives her certificate for completing her ESL class, he must now help her learn to speak English as fluently as he does. More than 200 students received certificates and awards for completing English courses and learning computer skills at the Notre Dame Education Center Awards Celebration held at the Corpus Christi Parish in Lawrence.

"Our goal was to create expanded opportunities for temporary workers in our community," said Merrimack Valley Project President the Rev. Victor Jarvis, a pastor of Ebenezer Christian Church in Lawrence. "It's critical that the workers develop broader English skills in order to help them advance toward full-time employment."

It's the kind of thing Notre Dame has been doing for years — teaching ESOL classes — but with Gillette's help, their reach has expanded. Proctor explained that the school has a budget of about \$250,000 a year, from Department of Education and private foundation grants. So Gillette's annual contribution of more than \$150,000 a year over three years is a significant boost to its bottom line.

"Gillette is so far ahead of the curve in investing in the community," said Proctor.

For students in the program, the Gillette money has already helped.

ESOL: Expanding opportunities for foreign-born students

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Nancy Troncoso, 40, of Lawrence, was sitting in the front row of a classroom at the Education Center during one of the classes in May, listening intently to her teacher, Remigia Sanchez, explain the difference between the words "need" and "want."

"I always wanted a diamond," said Troncoso, in English, to the half-dozen students. "But I need a job."

Students asked questions in a mixture of Spanish and English, as Sanchez tried to steer them toward using English.

After class, Troncoso, who works nights at Gillette but who formerly worked at Sonoco, said her language skills have not only helped her at work — where she now has a full-time job — but also when she goes to the doctor, where she no longer needs an interpreter.

But the Education Center, with the high ceilings and tall windows that are the trademarks of many converted mill buildings, offers more than just classroom instruction. A computer room with nearly two-dozen networked stations helps students learn English using the Rosetta Stone system, enhancing the classroom work.

Once they become proficient in English on the computer, they are given access to the Internet, where they can communicate with friends and family members from their home countries, said Proctor.

Another part of the school has a specially furnished room for

medical technician training — where people can become certified nursing assistants.

Mayelin Taveras, 19, of Lawrence, had been working in the kitchen at Methuen Health and Rehabilitation Center on Jackson Street, making just \$8 an hour. After going through the CNA training program, she got a job working more directly with patients, earning \$14 an hour.

But for Taveras, the Education Center is more than just a place to pick up job skills.

"I miss them," said Taveras, who got her CNA certificate in February, but who still stops in for frequent visits. "I like to come here. If you have a problem, they help you. They help you find jobs, and give you advice. It's like a second family."

That spirit is fostered in large part by Sister Gwynette, who greets every student with a welcoming hello and a handshake.

"We like to create an atmosphere of hospitality," said Proctor. "They say 'Good morning,' and 'How are you?'"

Which sounds basic, but most of the people entering the Notre Dame school are not only illiterate in English, but many of them are illiterate in their own language — something else that sets the program apart from others in the region.

That fact, and the fact that the school has computer classes, are at least two of the reasons that the Gillette money ended up going to Notre Dame rather than one of the other ESOL programs in Lawrence.

After MVP convinced Gillette to help out, they contacted WorkSource Partners, a Brookline-based consulting company that coordinates training, career counseling and hiring services. WorkSource then designed a program to train the temporary workers, and they picked Notre Dame as the "education partner," according to Mary Culhane, vice president of the consulting group.

"When we were starting our hunt for the perfect provider, we realized all the providers have a different niche," she said. "Notre Dame has computers, and is the only organization that would take people not literate in their own language."

WorkSource continues to have a role in the program, working closely with Sonoco and the company that places workers in the temporary jobs at the packing plant — Debbie's Staffing. Outreach workers regularly walk through the Sonoco plant, talking with employees — either recruiting them for the Notre Dame classes or simply offering career counseling, said Culhane.

While the Gillette-funded program has been successful at getting some people off the waiting list and into ESL classes, there's much more to do, said McArthur, adding that he hopes to expand the number of people taking classes at Notre Dame from 100 students a year to 500 students a year.

"That would take a big chunk out of the waiting list," said McArthur. He said MVP is courting funding from other sources, including local companies like UPS, New Balance and Bristol-Meyers, while also working with

federal, state and local legislators to try to bring more public funding to the program.

"We have no concrete commitments, but we're optimistic that other employers will ultimately step up," he said.

Added Annia Lemberth, past president of the Merrimack Valley Project: "That's our dream — to get everyone off the waiting list." Gillette Communications Director Mike Norton said the company is looking at expanding its support beyond three years, while remaining hopeful that other companies will get involved as well.

"We'd love to see this expand to be able to accommodate as many people as possible," he said. "That is a major goal — to get other companies involved."

OTHER ESOL* PROGRAMS IN LAWRENCE

- Adult Learning Center, 243 South Broadway
- International Institute, 125 Amesbury St.
- Lawrence Community Works, 60 Island St.
- Lawrence Literacy Works, 45 Franklin St.

*English for Speakers of Other Languages

PLAYERS IN THE GILLETTE/NOTRE DAME EDUCATION CENTER PARTNERSHIP

■ Gillette-Procter & Gamble, a multi-billion dollar company with brands ranging from Pampers and Tide to Oral-B and Olay. Pledged \$500,000 over three years to fund English and career-building classes for temporary workers at its packing plant, run by contractor Sonoco Packaging Services, at Devens Commerce Center near Ayer.

■ Merrimack Valley Project, a consortium of 34 congregations and labor and community groups based in Lawrence. MVP approached Gillette in early 2005, prior to its takeover by Procter & Gamble later that year, to help fund ESOL and career-building programs in Lawrence.

■ WorkSource Partners, a Brookline consulting company that provides and coordinates training, career counseling and hiring services. Once Gillette pledged funding, WorkSource was brought in to design the curriculum offered at Notre Dame and provide one-

on-one career counseling for students.

■ Notre Dame Education Center, an adult literacy school, was created in 1996 by the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, which has served the people of Lawrence since 1859. The center was picked by WorkSource to be the "education partner" offering ESOL and job training classes to people working at Sonoco, as well as others from Lawrence in need of those services.

■ Debbie's Staffing provides temporary employees to a variety of companies, including Sonoco, a company that packages Gillette razors at its plant in Devens. Many of the workers are from Lawrence and have limited English skills.

■ Sonoco, a company with a plant in Devens, packages razors for Gillette. During busy times of year, particularly around holidays and Father's Day, many temporary workers are needed to help package Gillette products.