

# In Common

The grammar  
of gratitude.



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Every night 150 adults—primarily immigrants building better lives for their families—learn English at Las Casas. Participants are deeply grateful, but waiting lists are long here at one of the Bay Area’s few English as a Second Language adult ed programs.

What will it take for Las Casas, the Dominican Sisters’ program in Oakland, to meet the growing demand?

BY GAIL TYSON PHOTOGRAPHS BY DREW KELLY



3  
ADULTS  
LEARN ENGLISH  
AT LAS CASAS IN 2002

2,000  
"ALUMNI"  
LEARN ENGLISH  
AT LAS CASAS BY 2014

**INSIDE THE CLASSROOM**

**Sister Ann Ronin taught three students English once a week. Twelve years later, her Las Casas outreach serves 250 students a year, providing 12,000 hours of instruction three nights a week in the nine-month ESL program staffed by volunteers.**

LEFT TO RIGHT: Volunteer Henny Hoogenbosch with students; Maritza; Sister Barbara Lerner with Juan Bernardo Ramos; Brother Antonio Gregory, OFM.



**When these students say Teacher, they speak with reverence.**

They come from days filled with hard work—construction, painting, house-cleaning—to study at Las Casas, the English language program at St. Elizabeth High School in Oakland. They arrive fluent in native tongues ranging from Spanish to Arabic and K’iche’. They show up determined “to make a better life for themselves and their children,” says Sister Barbara Lerner, OP, who greets everyone at the door and, increasingly, must turn people away.

In the extremely diverse Bay Area, the demand for Las Casas classes has grown exponentially as other English as a Second Language programs have decreased. Since June 2010, the Oakland Unified School District has offered no adult ESL classes, the result of budget cuts that slashed funds for adult education by 85%. Sister Ann Ronin began Las Casas in 2002 with three students, and by fall 2013, enrollment averages 125-150

students per night. By mid-March 2014, 81 applicants were wait-listed.

“We turn away people every night,” Sister Barbara says. “I have to say, ‘Come back in August.’”

**Learning at every level**

Three nights a week from September to May, 20 volunteer teachers spread across seven classrooms. Retirees, graduate students and professionals, they include Phyliss Martinez, a UC Berkeley School of Law program administrator who also spends five to 20 hours per week as Las Casas’ co-director.

A tall, energetic woman with a mop of gray curls, she began teaching at Las Casas in August 2011. Shortly afterward Sister Ann’s health declined rapidly; when she died that November, the leadership passed to Sister Barbara. “The Dominican Sisters made a commitment to continue the program as the congregation’s ministry. We keep streamlining and improving it,” Sister Barbara says.

On a cool March night in the beginners’ class, young men and

women from Guatemala, El Salvador and México work in small groups, identifying coins and bills and counting money. Franciscan Sister Marisa McDonald, OSF, a kindly woman with a radiant smile who serves as the program’s assistant director, gently but firmly encourages her students to move up to more challenging levels. She treasures the students’ success stories. “One construction worker told us, ‘Now I can talk to the people I work with,’” she says. “Imagine how isolating it was for him before.”

At the intermediate level, the students’ speaking ability and listening comprehension is advanced enough for teachers to incorporate reading and writing. In Martinez’s higher-level reading and writing classroom this evening, 14 men and 10 women enter quietly and get right to work. “Write at least two sentences,” she calls out. “And if you’re really fast, give me some more.” She moves up and down the aisles, teaching one-to-one with steadiness that inspires

confidence in the most tentative learners.

The class includes Maritza, a single working mother with two daughters. At first her four-year-old would cry when Maritza left for Las Casas. “She would cling to me,” Maritza remembers. “She’d say, ‘Mommy, don’t leave, stay here and hold me.’ I felt awful, but told her, ‘I have to learn.’” When Martinez heard the story, she told Maritza to bring her daughter to class, where she settled the child with paper and crayons during the 90-minute class session. When Maritza leaves for Las Casas now, her daughter says, “OK, Mommy, you go to school!”

Down the hall, Brother Antonio Gregory—a Franciscan friar who is pursuing a master’s degree in linguistics—strides around a classroom of advanced students. Lithe in a shamrock T-shirt and bright green pants, he is keenly aware when his students struggle with the baffling grammatical exceptions so common in English. “Let’s go over it again then,” he says, and elicits smiles when he

**Passionate advocate**  
When Phyliss Martinez returned to St. Elizabeth Elementary School 44 years after graduation, she followed a crowd into the cafeteria, where Las Casas first started. “The room was jam-packed. Students were sitting on the window sills,” she says. “I was captivated.”  
Two and a half years later, Phyliss’ passion for Las Casas still burns bright. It reflects the ardor of 16th-century Dominican friar Bartolomé de las Casas, who fought for the rights of indigenous peoples of the Americas, and of Dominican Sister Ann Ronin, whose passion for volunteering lives on in the program she founded.  
“People have made a commitment to be here,” Martinez says. “And being here takes all of us to a different place.”

exclaims, "OK, that's the easy part!"

Success spurs these learners on. Bernardo, a painting crew supervisor, says, "I need English to communicate with our customers." He shyly displays a translation program on his cell phone, explaining, "On the train, I look up words in the ads that are all around me."

Like Bernardo, many students beg for more Las Casas classes. "One and a half hours goes by so fast," Bernardo says. "If I came for two or three hours, I would make progress more quickly."

Elementary has educated students since 1893 and in the high school since 1921. "I have made it part of my mission," says Martin Procaccio, the high school's president and principal, "to be part of the fabric of this community."

"Las Casas is also a launching point for teachers who want to acquire skills and certification hours in teaching ESL," Martinez says. The need for ESL teachers has risen nationwide. The number of individuals with limited English proficiency grew by 80% between

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— SISTER BARBARA LARNER, OP

**Language as launch pad**


Las Casas benefits not only students and their employers, but also the students' families. "If you can train parents to be better educational providers," program co-director Martinez says, "you prime children to succeed."

Research backs her up: "By age three," writes Tina Rosenberg in *The New York Times*, "a poor child would have heard 30 million fewer words in his home environment than a child from a professional family."

At Las Casas, parents learn their way out of desperate cycles of poverty and language deficits that can persist for generations. Their growing ease with English also empowers their children to do well in school.

Another major beneficiary is the neighborhood, where St. Elizabeth

1990 and 2010, and it now represents 9% of the country's population. And the Pew Research Center projects the arrival of 67 million new immigrants between 2005 and 2050.

For now, Las Casas welcomes as many English learners as it can. The students cherish the privilege of learning. They appreciate the Dominican Sisters' commitment to maintain the program. Above all, they are deeply grateful for their teachers, whose patience and skill give the students the opportunity to make a better life. 

**START THE DIALOG**

Ask questions and share your thoughts with author Gail Tyson at [dgmtyson@bellsouth.net](mailto:dgmtyson@bellsouth.net).

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1

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**Laptop computers with CD slots for students**  
need: 8 cost: \$600 each

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need: 200 cost: \$8 each

Donate online  
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2

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QUESTIONS?  
Contact Sister Francis Clare Fischer, OP, at 510. 933.6310 or [clare.e.fischer@gmail.com](mailto:clare.e.fischer@gmail.com)



**A SAINT IN OUR DAY**  
Chef Bruno Serato teams with St. Catherine's Academy to serve free meals to motel kids.

ST. CATHERINE'S ACADEMY

**The patron saint of motel kids.**

To Sister Johnellen Turner, OP, chef and CNN Hero Bruno Serato is "a saint in our day."

Sister Johnellen, the president of St. Catherine's Academy—a MSJ Dominican-sponsored school in Anaheim—has partnered with the philanthropic chef for years, serving

dinner to low-income and homeless children who live in motels.

Feeding boys' hunger to learn unites this duo. Dinner menus now include SCA student mentors, playmates and tutors who hang out and help out in after-school programs. In January SCA enrolled

two motel boys who, she says, "have been so successful." The initiative, a highlight of SCA's 125th anniversary, is powered by love.

"For Bruno, it's all about the kids," Turner says. "He's a man of God, one of the holiest men I've ever met. I'm grateful that we are friends." 