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The English Channel

Monday, March 17, 2008 - MiBiz

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By Karen Gentry | MiBiz
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GRAND RAPIDS — Cuban native Marvin Riveron, a forklift driver at Lacks Enterprises, has come a long way since 2006 when he only knew a handful of English words. His supervisor encouraged him to take part in the Customized Workplace English Program, a program of the Literacy Center of West Michigan.

He appreciated that the classes were onsite and convenient with his schedule and that he learned language skills related to his job. In less than two years, he was promoted, a move helped by his mastery of English. Riveron's success and participation in the program was featured on a national news broadcast, gaining Lacks Enterprises and the Literacy Center gained some well-deserved attention.

"He (Riveron) is a very bright, bright person and his ability to learn language is phenomenal," said Kristin Ekkens, director of the Customized Workplace English Program.

The Literacy Center served 312 learners in the Customized Workplace English Program from Oct. 2006 to Sept. 2007. Employees served since 2004 have come from 21 different companies, not just in the Grand Rapids area, but also from Holland, Grand Haven and other places in Ottawa County.

"We're always seeking more companies," Ekkens told *MiBiz*. "We've structured our program so we can serve a number of companies that call."

In her marketing efforts, Ekkens targets companies that hire refugees and immigrants, many of whom come from Cuba, Sudan, Bosnia and Vietnam. She said a lot of these newcomers are brought to the area by Bethany Christian Services or through churches. The hard-working employees typically take entry-level positions and are motivated to learn English.

"Our goal is to bridge the language and the cultural gap," Ekkens said.

The Literacy Center is funded through donations, grants and other agencies, as well employer fees for programs like the Customized Workplace English program. Benteler, Spartan Stores and Lacks Enterprises helped with seed grants to launch the program in 2001. A recent grant helped the center gain a foothold in healthcare. For the past year and a half, classes have taken place at Spectrum Health to help teach English to Spectrum's diverse employee population.

Literacy in the workplace

Employer participation in Literacy Center programs since 2004:

- Boar's Head Provisions
- Buist Electric
- Butterball Farms
- DECC
- DeWys Manufacturing
- Display Pack
- Eenhoorn Properties
- Eneroflex (Dynaflex)
- Falcon Foam
- Family Christian Stores
- Ferris Coffee & Nut
- Foremost Insurance
- Gentex Corp.
- GR Medical Education & Research Center



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Participants can speak only English in the classes. Workplaces can feature three to four simultaneous classes catering to workers on different shifts or who have varying English proficiency. Contracted trainers, typically with master's degrees in English, teach the classes.

"We give employees the language tools they need to communicate on the job," Ekkens said.

Instruction is based on input from employers on what employees need to know and understand to succeed at their jobs. Students are initially tested through oral, reading and writing tests to determine proficiency levels.

Improving self esteem of employees is the number-one result, according to supervisors. Ekkens said supervisors also like that employees are better able to work in teams. They see improvements in quality, safety, productivity and critical thinking, not to mention more positive attitudes toward change and better employee morale.

Marne-based DeWys Manufacturing Inc. offered the Literacy Center Program to its employees with limited English speaking ability, according to Human Resource Manager Laura Elsner. The sheet metal fabrication company has a large population of Bosnians employees from Spanish-speaking countries. More than 10 employees took part in the voluntary program.

Late last year, the Literacy Center also began offering multicultural workplace training for managers, supervisors, human resources staff and other English-speaking employees.

"We want to help supervisors understand the need to meet in the middle and learn more about foreign-born populations and the cultural issues," Ekkens said.

Once the cultural training takes place, supervisors understand the need for the English classes. Supervisors need to recognize that English spoken here is typically very informal with a lot of slang and casual language, making it hard for newcomers to grasp.

The Literacy Center recently honored Windquest Companies as its vendor of the year. The furniture and closet organizer manufacturer held classes and its supervisors took part in the multicultural training.

- Grand Rapids Community College
- Grand Rapids Controls
- GR Foam Technologies
- Lacks Enterprises
- Lynn Masonry
- Metro Health
- Ranir Corporation
- Spectrum Health
- Spectrum Industries Inc.
- Saint Mary's Health Care
- Van Andel Research Institute
- Vi-Chem Corp.
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