

Daring to Risk a Caring Response

By S. MARY BODDE

As Educational Services Coordinator in the Office of Second Language Acquisition for the Cincinnati Public School District, S. Margarita Maria Brewer develops and coordinates educational programs for ELL students (English Language Learners) and their families. Working with her is Associate Mariela Schulten, a Spanish instructor at the College of Mount St. Joseph and an interpreter/translator in contract with Cincinnati Public Schools (CPS).

One-thousand ELL students speaking 66 different languages from 75 countries are represented in CPS schools – with Hispanic (40 percent) predominating.

“To communicate effectively with our ELL families, we contract with individuals like Mariela and a local language services agency that can provide translations/interpretations in most of the languages we need,” S. Margarita said. To provide extra help to ELL students, Sister developed the ESL (English as a Second Language) Volunteer Tutors Program, now in its third year, for children K-12. “It is crucial to have trained tutors,” she added, “and to select among the applicants who can relate well to these special students.”

Besides the ESL Volunteer Tutors Program, Sister also is involved with ESL classes provided for adults in various locations, with health and nutrition education classes in English and Spanish. These are for parents and students in the district in collaboration with the Ohio State Extension Program. To assist new immigrant families coming into the district, S. Margarita is developing a much-needed Newcomer Program to begin this fall; every new immigrant family will be welcomed and encouraged to participate.

Newcomers to this country don’t realize all the requirements they must meet: getting immunization vaccines, learning to shop, and managing bills and finances. With so many different cultures – newcomers from 21 countries – S. Margarita and Mariela must knock on doors to view first-hand immigrant situations and begin to build trust.

Knowing the community and its resources is a “must,” especially for S. Margarita. Through her efforts

and collaboration with Northern Kentucky University, Hispanic high school students can attend the Hispanic Summer Science Camp at its campus. Her reward is to hear the students say, “I love science!” She is a member of the Hispanic Scholarship Fund, a national organization that during the last four years has collected more than \$1 million for scholarships in Cincinnati. Students qualifying can get funds toward a bachelor’s degree, a master’s degree, and even a Ph.D.

“Keeping Our Cultures Alive,” a three-day cultural program, was organized by the English Language



S. Margarita Brewer interacts with families during “Keeping Our Cultures Alive,” a three-day cultural event organized by English Language Learning Foundation, founded by Sister. The program, featuring Mexican, Guatemalan and Panamanian cultures, included breakfast and lunch from their own cultural menus, a Power Point presentation, music, dances and piñatas.

Learning Foundation, founded by S. Margarita. It was made possible last summer with an SC Ministry Foundation grant. It was held at The Women’s Connection in Cincinnati and featured Mexican, Guatemalan and Panamanian cultures. Seventy persons, mostly families, participated. It included breakfast and lunch from their own cultural menus, a Power Point presentation, music, dances and piñatas.

“To keep their cultures alive is so important for immigrant parents, who want their children to enjoy the richness of their culture,” Sister said. Conflicts grow between children and their parents, especially among teenagers who are into their peers’ music and language, which parents don’t understand.

S. Margarita also is on the Board of Crossroads Health Center, Over-the-Rhine (Cincinnati), which offers health care to families who are uninsured. She works with the Cincinnati Youth Collaborative to find mentors for children needing someone to help them become responsible adults in the future.

Besides initiating and directing programs for children and families during the day, S. Margarita responds to various special “interruptions” as she calls them – phone calls from people inquiring about services provided by CPS and other social service agencies. It is not in her job description but after work and on weekends she and Mariela visit families to assess what else they may need, such as housing, furniture and food. That’s when their own backgrounds “kick in” – both are from Panama and have gone through the immigrant experience themselves.

Through Project Connect (which helps families with housing, food, transportation and clothing) and the Sisters of Charity Social Justice Fund, S. Margarita has been able to help homeless families with housing.

“We found a family of four in a one-room Price Hill apartment sleeping on only one mattress,” Mariela remembered. Another Sister of Charity, S. Shirley Dix, obtained four mattresses through Furniture Fair. The 9-year-old girl had never been in school because she was the babysitter for her 1-year-old sister while her mother and father took turns working around the clock. Culturally, fathers

make all the decisions, but neither parent would accept the explanation that according to U.S. law every child must be in school. In spite of speaking a Guatemalan dialect, and only a little Spanish, the parents were persuaded, with persistent explanations, to send their daughter to school.

Mariela often takes her daughter on these visits to expose her to the different cultures, as well as the poverty that so many immigrants endure. Her daughter tells her friends, some of whom live in well-to-do families, and they want to come to help too, so the learning experience spreads.

Mariela’s volunteering at The Women’s Connection in Price Hill has helped her offer another option for

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Associate Mariela Schulten works with an immigrant family she and S. Margarita Brewer tutor regularly. The pair participates in the English Language Learners program through the Cincinnati Public School District.

Hispanic women to meet together. “We want them to learn how to care for themselves,” S. Margarita added, “so they won’t become dependent on us.”

“Dealing with high school kids,” S. Margarita said, “is one of the hardest things for me. How can I tell immigrant students that they need to graduate, to go to college, when they know they don’t have the ‘proper documentation’ or the money to go to college? With current immigration laws they can’t receive scholarships from foundations or financial aid. We need to lobby to have the ‘Dream Act’ passed in Congress, so all immigrants can obtain higher education.”

Reflecting on the passage in Matthew: “Amen I say to you, whatever you do for one of these least brothers and sisters of mine, you do for me,” S. Margarita and Mariela feel vitalized by this scripture to see Jesus in the faces of immigrant children and their families as they assist them with their needs, especially education.