



2014 VACo Achievement Awards

Deadline: June 2, 2014

Application Form

All applications must include the following information. Separate applications must be submitted for each eligible program. **Deadline: June 2, 2014.**

Program Information

Locality Henrico County

Program Title ESL Conversation Café

Program Category Customer Service

Contact Information

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Title Librarian

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Signature of county administrator or chief administrative officer

Name John Vithoulkas

Title County Manager

Signature 

2014 VACo Achievement Award - ESL Conversation Café at Henrico County Public Library

Overview

The ESL (English as a Second Language) Conversation Café is a English language conversation program offered by Henrico County Public Library (HCPL) in which non-native-English-speaking adults can practice speaking English, meet new people, and participate in an American experience.

Problem

The program was developed by library staff in response to the growing diversity of the county. Based on data from the 2005-2009 American Community Survey (via *gcir.com*), Henrico County had over 29,000 residents that were foreign born, over 10% of the county's total population. Over 22% of this population over age 5 speaks English "less than well." There are a number of traditional instructional ESL classes in the area, but these classes leave little time for participants to practice what they have learned or know. What was missing was a place to practice speaking English, learn about American culture and meet people.

How the program meets criteria

HCPL's ESL Conversation Cafes meet each of the criteria listed by filling the community's need for casual spaces for non-native English speakers to meet, learn about American culture and practice speaking English while staying within the library's budget and staffing constraints. The program has also encouraged and strengthened relationships with Henrico County Schools Adult Education program, as well as private and governmental immigrant support organizations in the area. Very little funding and minimal staffing is needed to replicate this program in another locality.

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How the program is carried out

The Cafés are held the second Wednesday of each month at the Tuckahoe Area Library and the fourth Tuesday of each month at the Dumbarton Area Library. Each café is 60-90 minutes.

Conversations are guided by library staff and native-English-speaking volunteers. The Cafés also offer an opportunity to introduce immigrants to the many resources of the Henrico County Public Library, and often conclude with a tour of the library for first time participants.

Library staff promoted the new Cafés through the library website, social media as well as posters in the library and in local stores that cater to the immigrant population. Flyers and schedules were sent to local ESL teachers and programs.

Staffing & Costs

There are minimal costs associated with running the ESL Conversation Café. Valuable time from our community volunteers is free. Cost for refreshments and snacks runs \$5-\$10/month.

Library staff time required to run the program is limited to the two coordinators, who each average 2-3 hours/month on promotion and volunteer recruitment in addition to the 3 hours/month spent setting up and running each Café, for a total of less than 140 hours/year. ESL class orientations occur sporadically and can take a staff member up to 90 minutes. And while library staff members are not properly trained to be ESL teachers, they are able to facilitate conversation and fill a valuable role by helping English learners practice their English skills.

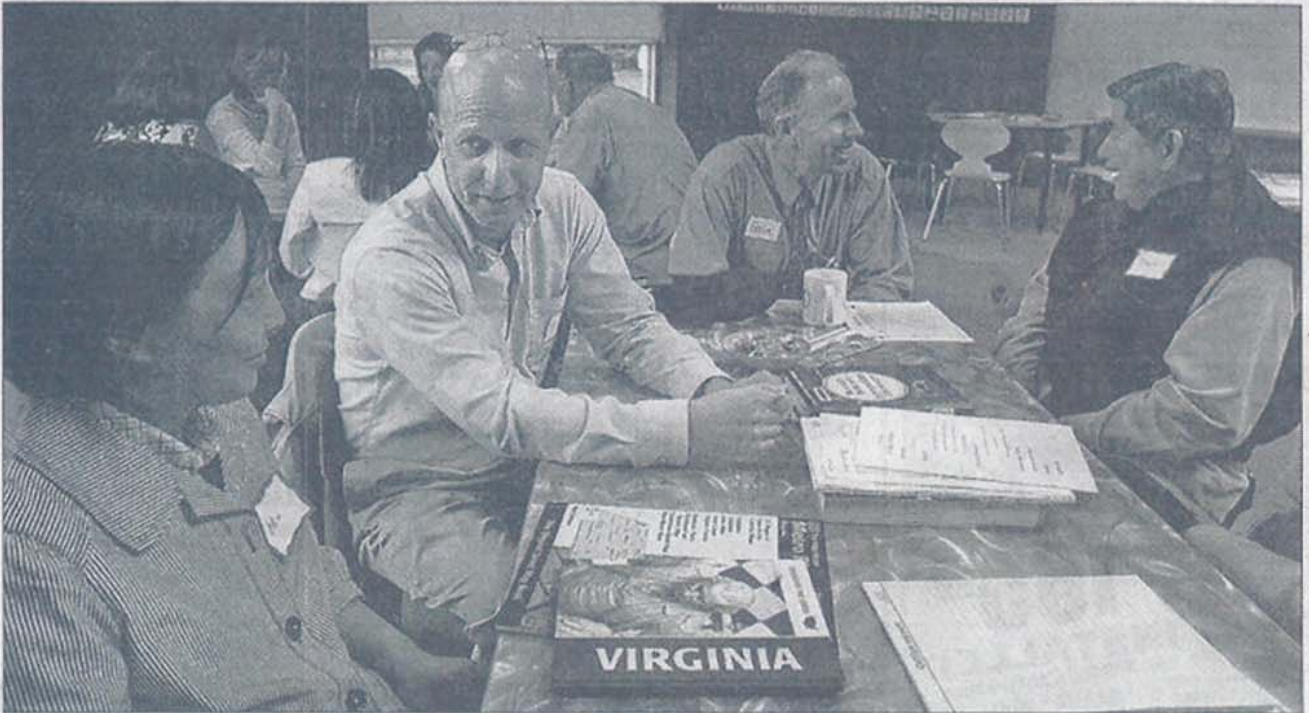
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Results

Following the trial period in 2010, the Tuckahoe and Dumbarton ESL Conversation Cafés have continued on a monthly basis (except some Decembers) since January 2011. In 2013 there were 81 volunteer and immigrant participants at the Dumbarton ESL Conversation and 86 volunteer and immigrant participants at the Tuckahoe ESL Conversation Café. Since 2010 the ESL Cafes have had immigrants from over 40 countries. Participants range all across the socioeconomic spectrum.

The ESL Conversation Cafés have opened up improved communications between HCPL and the immigrant-support community in Henrico, especially the institutions providing ESL instruction, including Henrico County Public Schools Adult Education. ESL instructors have become more aware of HCPL resources and services that can be of assistance to immigrants. Instructors who contact library staff inquiring about the Café are offered library orientations for their classes, and in 2013 there were 7 class tours, providing library instruction to almost 100 ESL students.

The ESL Conversation Café program was created to extend library services to an underserved population, the growing number of non-English-speaking immigrants moving into Henrico County. This program offers a new and useful service to county residents at a very low cost, and is currently the only one of its kind in the Richmond area. Through a program that offers an opportunity to improve English language conversation skills, immigrants are also introduced to valuable library resources services in a safe and welcoming environment.



P. KEVIN MORLEY/TIMES-DISPATCH

The Tuckahoe Library's ESL Conversation Café helps people practice speaking English. China native Min Jiang (left) talks with volunteer Ed Crews, while Vietnam native Tram Huyuyn (right) chats with librarian Steven Carter-Lovejoy.

Facilitating dialogue in Henrico

Non-native English speakers develop their language skills via program at two libraries

BY LUZ LAZO
Times-Dispatch Staff Writer

At the downtown laboratory where Min Jiang works, she doesn't get much of a chance to practice her English.

She has learned the language well in the 10 years she's lived in Richmond, but she lacks the confidence to speak it without doubting herself.

On Wednesdays at the Tuckahoe Area Library, however, Jiang speaks up.

"Here, I feel it's OK to make a mistake," said the native of China who speaks Mandarin with co-workers — also from China — at VCU Medical Center.

The Henrico County Public Library is offering Jiang and non-native English speakers a chance to improve their language skills at the ESL Conversation Café, a pilot program held twice a month at the Tuckahoe and Dumbarton libraries.

At the sessions, the English-only conversation usually runs smoothly. The participants already know some English. The vol-

If you go

The ESL Conversation Café is a pilot program for adults that will run through August at:

Tuckahoe Library: 1901 Starling Drive, on the first and third Wednesdays at 7 p.m.

Dumbarton Library: 6800 Staples Mill Road, on the second and fourth Tuesdays at 7 p.m.

More information: or to volunteer, visit www.henricolibrary.org.

SOURCE: Henrico County Library

unteers engage them in topics about everyday life in the U.S. and in Richmond.

"Nobody really cares if I speak good," said a timid Jiang at the weekly session Wednesday.

The program is like no other in the Richmond area, said Barbara F. Weedman, public services administrator and chairwoman of the library's multicultural committee. It is not an ESL class, she said, but merely a space where the participants — just a few thus far but representing countries from around the globe — meet other people, interact with English-speaking volunteers and improve their English skills.

The casual setting, Weedman said, removes the pressures of learning English of ten felt in a classroom setting.

"It is very informal and non-threatening," she said. "It creates community."

Librarian Steven Carter-Lovejoy, who oversees the Tuckahoe sessions, said most of the participants already use library services. "We learned that there is a huge number of non-native speakers. . . . We recognize the need, and we are trying to figure out how to help."

The most recent figures from the U.S. Census show that 32,554 Henrico residents, or about 12 percent of the county's population, speak a language other than English at home.

"We are the U.N. here," said volunteer Mary Theobald, who on Wednesday talked about places to visit in Richmond with Slovakia native Erika Ciprusova and Colombia native Gladys Leland.

In the hour at the library's children's room, Jiang's confidence grew as she asked questions about one of America's favorite sports. And thanks to volunteer Ed Crews — and the sketches he drew to be a bit more clear during their one-on-one conversation — she left with a greater knowledge of baseball.

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