

ESOL Program Supports Area Educators

The Virginia Adult Institute for Lifelong Learning (VAILL) teamed up with Fairfax County Public Schools' English for Speakers of Other Languages program (ESOL) in a two-day conference at George Mason University (GMU) last month. Speakers, panelists and presenters spotlighted integration and the immigrant experience. The 257 participants included teachers, administrators, tutors and volunteers. Although the event promoted literacy among adult learners, those who teach ESOL at higher levels also benefited.

The VAILL and ESOL conference had not been held for four years. According to Adult Community Education director Bonnie Moore, "Funding issues on the state level led to a loss of leadership grant money. But it became clear that there is such a need for a conference like this. We are thrilled to have it back. It is an opportunity for our teachers to hear wonderful presenters."

Sympathetic laughter rose in the ballroom at Student Union II when a film was shown, portraying a well-educated policymaker from the Netherlands succumbing to writing Arabic vocabulary on her arm to help her learn that language. Nouredine Erradi, the conference keynote speaker has produced this film and two others to depict intercultural experience. Erradi has been working in intercultural relations and communications for the past two decades. He is the interculturalisation coordinator of the Regional Training Centre in the Netherlands.

While serving as the coordinator of European projects, Erradi worked on issues concerning immigration, integration and intercultural dialogue. His films document European teachers, administrators and policy makers who participated in simulated integration programs. The film at GMU showed a group of Dutch teachers in Marrakech learning to read and write in Arabic and taking temporary jobs as hotel staff or food sellers in a marketplace. These participants learned through this experience how difficult it is to learn a language as an adult and what it is like to be an immigrant in a foreign culture.

Later on the first day, I attended the Vocabulary in Language Learning session presented by David Red, former director of Adult ESOL for Fairfax County Public Schools, and now with the Foreign Service Institute. The session was packed, but four chairs remained unoccupied at the front of the classroom. I sat in one of them and was soon one of four guinea pigs in a lesson in listening, reading and even writing in—wait for it—Nepalese. Red wrote in a fluid curlicue script. My transcription of it looked like a three-year-old's. Red is an excellent actor, so his portrayal of four vocabulary words made their meaning clear. Trying to copy the writing was challenge enough and trying to remember four little words was harder than I thought. None of the four reminded me of anything. Hadn't we all had tertiary education? Well, that was the point. Learning a foreign language as an adult is hard. How can we, as teachers, help our adult language learners?

The educational publishing company Pearson Longman sent a representative, John Brezinsky, to tell us about new online software. Brezinsky explained proudly that his publisher had gone green and had neither handouts nor any free publications.

At the beginning of the second day, four panelists, each of whom has successfully integrated into American society, told stories of their personal journeys.

- Carlos Castro rose from dishwasher to owner of Todos Supermarkets in Prince William County.
- Dr. Emma Violand-Sanchez is the Democratic Candidate for the Arlington School Board and an

adjunct professor at Georgetown University.

- Illryong Moon, who was once an ESOL student, is now a partner with the law firm of Moon, Park and Associates. He was chairman of the Fairfax County School Board in 2006 and now serves as a member at large.
- Hamilton Ramirez graduated from the Fairfax Adult ESOL Program and the Fairfax County Training Futures Program. Despite sudden health setbacks, he now works in an Alexandria law firm and for the Fairfax Adult ESOL Program as a computer lab assistant.

Jennifer Fadden, Adult Community Education program specialist and VAILL conference coordinator, said, “ESOL teachers not only teach the English language; they also teach newcomers about American culture and society. In years past, the goal of this process was to help newcomers assimilate. Assimilation is not the goal anymore. Through integration, we value cultures that allow newcomers to find their places in American society while maintaining their own cultural identity.”