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New initiative transforms native Spanish speakers into in-demand language coaches

by Kate Bradshaw / Almanac



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As a young woman living in Menlo Park, Brenda Graciano was used to clocking 60-hour work weeks, splitting her time at two local restaurants.

Then, the coronavirus pandemic struck, decimating the local restaurant industry. Her schedule was cut to 10 hours a week at one of the restaurants.

But thanks to an innovative new initiative by [Upward Scholars](#), a Palo Alto-based nonprofit that supports students who are adult immigrants, Graciano now has a new source of income that she finds more fulfilling and pays a better hourly rate.

The program, called Habla Mas (which means "speak more" in Spanish), trains native Spanish speakers to become Spanish language coaches. And, according to Elizabeth Weal, who founded Upward Scholars and is managing the program, it's been a surprising success in its first few weeks.

The program, Weal said, was created in response to information that showed, even before the coronavirus crisis, underemployment was an ongoing challenge for many of Upward Scholars' participants, including program graduates.

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At the same time, there are a number of people in the community who express interest in learning and improving their Spanish skills.

Upward Scholars runs a conversation program to help students improve their English skills, and some of the English-speaking conversation volunteers have said they are interested in a similar program focused on developing Spanish skills, said Linda Prieto, executive director of Upward Scholars.

During the first part of the initiative, four current or former students at Woodside's Cañada College underwent an eight-week training program, held Saturday mornings from January to March, where they reviewed grammar fundamentals, common mistakes language learners make, and how to engage students.

Just as they were preparing to complete their training and start working face-to-face with clients, Weal said, the shelter-in-place order hit, so they decided to pivot their teaching model to video sessions. The program, for now, is offered entirely remotely. Coaching sessions are offered one-on-one or to groups in the same household. Each session costs the same, whether it's for one student or several people in the same household.

Many of Upward Scholars' participants have always been on the receiving end of education, Weal said. Getting to be a teaching professional in the community has been good for students' self confidence and self-esteem, she added.

A tough time to be a student

According to Linda Prieto, executive director of Upward Scholars, the pandemic has hit the adult students the nonprofit works with especially hard. The nonprofit has been hard at work to help students access the tools they need to continue to study remotely, such as laptops and Wi-Fi hotspots, as community college courses remain available only online through the rest of the school year. But her students' main concern, she added, is the loss of wages and income – and how they'll pay for rent and food.

To help with food insecurity, Upward Scholars provided students \$75 Safeway gift cards in March and April. Prieto herself stood in lines for several hours at local Safeway stores the day before the shelter-in-place took effect to make sure gift cards were available to the students, she said.

But when it comes to paying rent, she added, some students aren't able to access rent relief funds, because those funds are provided only to leaseholders, and there are some students who may not be on a lease.

In addition, about 60% of the students the nonprofit works with are parents, and, like many people with children at home right now, they may struggle to get work done without child care help.

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Despite those hardships, though, Prieto said, they're not seeing students dropping out at this difficult time. The folks who are impacted most by the coronavirus, she added, are also very resilient and are used to having to juggle heavy demands from work, school and home, she said.

When students have dropped out, it's more likely to be those whose circumstances prevent them from taking online classes – such as students who traveled abroad to visit their families and haven't been able to return yet, because they may not have reliable enough internet access, she said.

Even the one student who has tested positive for COVID-19 wanted to continue with the assigned coursework, she said.

A new career path

Graciano said she has discovered many advantages to her new job with Habla Mas. Compared to working in a restaurant, which can be stressful and involve the constant need to multitask, being a Spanish coach allows her to plan her days better, build one-on-one connections with her students and develop her teaching skills. She used to work as a nanny, she said, and is especially enjoying teaching children.

She said she likes being a coach. "I love my language – Spanish," she said. "Besides that, I like when people get interested in it."

She's now considering language coaching as a long-term career, and is accepting new clients.

Coaching sessions are tailored to what the student wants, whether that's grammar or conversation, and the 24 students who have signed up to work with the tutors have a range of language experiences.

To sign up to work with a Spanish coach through Habla Mas, fill out an online form [here](#) and contact the [coach](#) you'd like to work with. The first lesson is free. Lessons are taught in half or full hour sessions and range from \$14 to \$16 per lesson for half hour lessons and \$26 to \$30 for full hour lessons.

The Almanac's Holiday Fund supports Upward Scholars and nine other local nonprofits.

Kate Bradshaw reports food news and feature stories all over the Peninsula, from south of San Francisco to north of San José. Since she began working with Embarcadero Media in 2015, she's reported on everything from Menlo Park's City Hall politics to Mountain View's education system. She has won awards from the California News Publishers Association for her coverage of local government, elections and land use reporting. [Read more >>](#)

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Comments

Caruso
 Menlo Park: University Heights
 on Apr 30, 2020 at 9:52 am

An excellent article on a creative new program! Upward Scholars is doing a wonderful job helping an often-overlooked group--adult immigrant English-learners--to better their lives through education. In bettering their own lives, these folks are role models for their children and others in their community. I've served in many capacities with the organization--including as a board member and a tutor--so I have first-hand knowledge of their success. You, too, can help--as a donor, tutor, other kind of volunteer, or as an Habla Mas participant! You won't regret it!

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Resident
 Menlo Park: Menlo Oaks
 on May 3, 2020 at 9:11 pm

Sounds like a great program. So many people in our community don't receive federal stimulus so this program and this organization are filling a real gap. Many nonprofits are struggling right now...give if you can!

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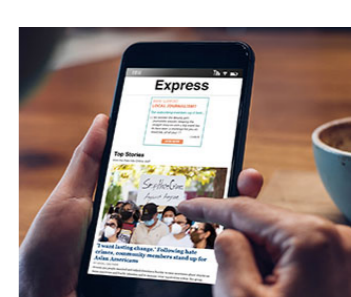
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