

Immersion Spanish class equips Texas Baptists for missions_71204

July 9, 2004

Posted: 7/09/04

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By Craig Bird

Texas Baptist Communications

SAN ANTONIO-Norma Griffith probably will lose some of the Spanish-language proficiency she worked so hard to gain. But the image of a little girl sitting on the bare ground at an orphanage in Piedras Negras, Mexico, has taken up permanent residence in her memory.

“I just keep wondering what will happen to her,” the 72-year-old explained as she completed a two-week intensive Spanish immersion class at the Baptist University of the Americas.

Griffith's concern for children extends from Piedras Negras to east Dallas, where she works as a volunteer with young children at the White Rock Center of Hope. And those same young children will motivate Griffith to use her Spanish skills as she talks with them—and their parents.



Mike
Massar,
pastor of
First
Baptist
Church in
Tyler, is
greeted by
a member
of Primera
Iglesia
Bautista
Mexicana
in San
Antonio
when the
intensive
Spanish
immersion
class he is
taking
visits the
church for
Wednesday
night
prayer
meeting.

That one-two payoff—a bonding with the Hispanic people and culture, as well as improved grammar and vocabulary knowledge—is exactly the intent of immersion classes at BUA. Scholarships are provided to members of Baptist General Convention of Texas churches by the Mary Hill Davis

Offering for Texas Missions.

“The new frontiers for our Baptist witness have shifted from merely a focus on geography to a focus on culture,” BUA President Albert Reyes told class members. “By 2015, every-other Texan will be Hispanic. ... I am convinced we will not have a Baptist voice or witness that will be heard in the future if we fail to prepare leaders who understand and communicate effectively to the non-Western or Hispanic worldview.”

Julie O'Teter couldn't agree more.

“In our society today, we need to be able to communicate at basic levels with everyone, and that starts with a respect for different cultures,” the mother of three teenagers said. “It also says that we Anglo Texas Baptists are serious about being co-laborers with Hispanic Baptists, equal partners in sharing Christ with our state.”

O'Teter, who studied Spanish 20 years ago at Baylor University, said the class jump-started her confidence so she can “struggle through” becoming proficient.

“I really am grateful my boss (E.B. Brooks, who leads the BGCT church missions and evangelism section) saw the importance of me investing the time in this. I'm hosting a singles mission trip to Nuevo Laredo in July, and what I've learned will really get some use then,” she said.

This was the ninth class at BUA in 11 years for Jody Hornback, Mission Service Corps outreach director at First Baptist Church in Hull. “Everybody wants to know why I keep coming back—I guess it's because I can't learn Spanish,” she joked.

“Actually, I got frustrated years ago on a bird-watching trip to Costa Rica because I couldn't read the signs, so I started studying Spanish. I tried several things and even went to a language school in Mexico before I came

to the Mary Hill Davis course.

“And what a difference to be in a Christian environment! Along the way, I just fell in love with the people and the culture, so I've just kept coming back to improve my knowledge.”

People in her small East Texas town know about that love and contact her when they need a Spanish speaker.

“I've even been able to translate in court for a young girl who couldn't speak English and help her,” she said. “For a while, I even drove 25 miles each way, two round trips every Sunday to play the piano for a Spanish church.”

Jack and Carol Hodges of First Baptist Church in Duncanville also came to BUA because of a sign—at least his desire to be able to read them. “Jack didn't know 'hola' for 'adios,' so we came to San Antonio last February for the class before we took a trip to Argentina and Chile,” she said. “It was a marvelous experience, so we came back this summer for the longer course.”

Her brother, Gordon Moore, told them about the class—by e-mail from the Canary Islands, where he is a missionary.

“He read something about it in the Baptist Standard and called it to our attention,” she explained. “We came wanting language skills, but we left with so much more—more than we ever bargained for. Yes, we know a lot more Spanish, but we also carry away a tremendous appreciation for the integrity, knowledge, goals and visions of Dr. Reyes and BUA. ...

“It is not enough to know the language; we must also learn the history, culture and religion. We realize we must change our approach and methodology of telling people about Jesus by understanding and adjusting to a changing world.”

This was the second time Guillermo and Ana Chavez have taught the class.

“This experience is a good first step toward a linguistic partnership for people who like to be exposed to Hispanic culture and the language,” he said. “It encourages them to go back to their own reality, ponder on the experience and come back next time with more questions. BUA presents a more holistic approach, and the church will benefit as it is equipped to render better service in a difficult and complex landscape like Texas.”

The next intensive Spanish immersion class at BUA will be Oct. 18-22. Applications include the form for receiving the Mary Hill Davis Offering scholarship. RV hook-ups are available.

Information is available by contacting Mary Ranjel by e-mail at mranel@bua.edu or by phone at (800) 721-1396.

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