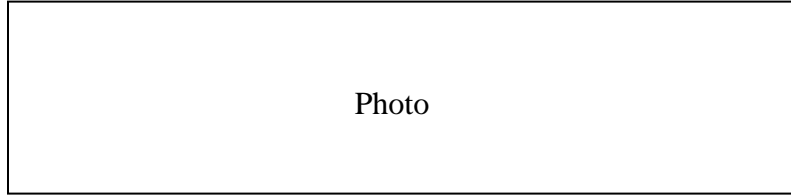


## **The ABCs, a Tool of Liberation**

*A group of women  
dream of a better future  
while they learn to read  
and write*



**Elena de la Cruz**

Special to La Opinión

*Photo Caption: Instructor Donald Nollar in a literacy class.*

The grandparents of Estela Perez never sent her to school because, being a woman, they thought her place was in the kitchen. Josefa Hernandez didn't go either; she had to take care of the family's animals. As a result of carelessness and lack of a birth certificate, Sandra Martinez never stepped into a classroom.

Years later, this time pushed by their own determination, Estela, 27 years old, Josefa, 30 years old, and Sandra, 22 years old, finally have a teacher and they sit in front of a chalk board with a pencil in their hands. Along with a few other women they attend literacy classes daily at Maternal and Child Health Access in Pico-Union to learn to read and write.

"Pablo is 12 years old," Josefa Hernandez writes attentively in a notebook. The ability to write her son's name fills her with pride.

"I need to learn, I cannot write my children's names at the clinic," explains a woman from Guatemala, whose native language is Mayan and learned to speak Spanish in the United States more than a decade ago.

Life is not easy for illiterate people. Numerous activities that for the majority of people are normal, are nearly impossible for them. One student laments she cannot write down medical appointment dates. Another, who was not able to pass her driving test, still drives, but she needs to take some of her children so that they can read the signs for her. One woman does not recognize the numbers on the buses. Another woman has purchased the wrong products at the supermarket because she can't read the labels on the products.

They are activities that seem simple, which at the end of the day start adding up and take away from a person, their independence, their well being, and love for oneself.

"It depresses me a lot. I have lost a lot of time because of fear of having someone make fun of me. Now I come to school with lots of hope," says Elvia Cerritos, 27 years old.

"Now I can read the prices at the supermarket. Before they use to confuse me. I feel very satisfied. They are opening my eyes," adds Estela Pérez.

Besides overcoming daily obstacles, the principal motivation that persuades many of these women is the desire to find jobs and be able to participate in their children's education, explains Donald Nollar, instructor of the literacy classes, financed through Proposition 10, with taxes from the tobacco industry.

"I want to read, I want to help my children at school, I want to work, I cannot have a business without knowing how to write or read," explains Eulalia Gonzalez, a Guatemalan woman, 27 years old, whose children are taken care of [childcare] while she is in class, an indispensable service for many of these women.

There are those who are closer to fulfilling dreams that had been buried for a long time. For Estela Perez, it is to send a letter written with her own hand and handwriting to her children to her country of origin.

“With God’s will, I will send them a letter that I have written because I can,” she says.

In Los Angeles, it is estimated that there are 800,000 Latinos illiterate in their native language, according to Marcos Cajina, Executive Director of Centro Latino de Educación Popular.

“The majority are women who never went to school and are members of a society where their participation is limited or eliminated. They are victims at a high level of abuse at all levels of society,” indicates Cajina.

The Director adds that when a woman overcomes illiteracy, not only does she benefit, their families benefit as well. Women are mainly responsible for their families and their new knowledge allows them to make more informed decisions over their education, their health and many areas that have an impact in their quality of life. Also, it opens the doors to learn English, another necessary tool.

Cajina developed the learning materials used in classes at Maternal and Child Health Access based on immigrant experiences, so that they can identify easily with the materials that they study.

The course is sixteen weeks long and by graduation the students are able to read and write at a second grade level, which allows them to overcome many barriers.

“My children applaud me. My daughter brought a paper from school and I read it. ‘Dear parents’, my daughter said, ‘Wow, mommy, you know!’” tells Elvia Cerritos, who has been attending the class for the past two months.

“I have learned to read a little. I help my son who is in the first grade with addition and subtraction,” adds Maria Hernandez, 29 years old, who started at the same time.

When they talk about their triumphs, they admit that not only have they changed in that they now are able to recognize the letters [of the alphabet], they also feel better in their skin, they do not walk ashamed.

Part of the objective of the literacy classes is for these women to discover that they have the power to transform their world. Sandra Martinez, who now has learned to sign her name, is on her way to achieving this.

“Before, my husband had to sign [my name for me] and I would feel bad, without him I was not worth anything. This is why I decided to come. I want to work and learn how to develop myself.”

### **Where to learn to read and write Spanish**

Maternal and Child Health Access

- (213) 749-4261

Centro Latino de Educación Popular

- (213) 483-5483

Instituto Cultura Mexicano

- (213) 624-3660