

Lending a Hand, in New York and Beyond

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She Fled Venezuela. Free English Lessons Helped Her Feel at Home in Queens.

Literacy Partners

Iovanna Campanella never thought she would end up in the United States, let alone take English classes here.

She used to work as a physical therapist at a hospital in Venezuela. When the leadership there changed and aligned itself with the government, some of her co-workers and patients started threatening her for supporting the opposition party. That went on for years, Ms. Campanella said, until she felt so unsafe that she quit.

When the economic crisis in Venezuela worsened in 2015, she and her husband worried about raising their daughter, Aroa, there. He immigrated to the United States later that year, settling in Elmhurst, Queens. Ms. Campanella and Aroa followed soon after.

In 2017, Ms. Campanella enrolled Aroa in a prekindergarten program at the Malcolm X Day Care Center in nearby Corona. Literacy Partners, a nonprofit organization that helps immigrant and low-income parents expand their language skills, was offering free English classes there. The organization's Books of Their Own Program received a grant from The Neediest Cases Fund endowment.

A month later, she dived into her first lesson. Two or three times a week, she would drop off Aroa at day care and head to class. She was surrounded by fluent English speakers and soon, she said, her daughter would be among them. "I wanted to adapt to that reality," Ms. Campanella said, speaking through an interpreter. After another daughter, Selma, was born last year, Literacy Partners allowed Ms. Campanella to bring Selma to the classes.

In late 2017, Ms. Campanella found a part-time job as an assistant at an agency that provides translation and notary services. The classes came in handy: She needed to speak English with her colleagues. "I'm not shy anymore," she said, adding that the classes had helped her communicate with Aroa's teachers.

"I used to think, I'm never going to speak English," she said. "Look at me now."



Iovanna Campanella with her daughters, Aroa, left, and Selma, in Elmhurst, Queens. She took free English classes through Literacy Partners. Alex Flynn for The New York Times