



Sister Lakshmie Napagoda (center) is an enthusiastic cheerleader as two DeNeuville students become comfortable with the nuts-and-bolts of computers before tackling more advanced skills.

Photos by Stan Carroll

DeNeuville Learning Center

Women from around the world learn English, computer skills and self-esteem

By Margaret Wallace

Erika Lopez remembers the moment when she knew she needed help.

"My oldest son is five," said this young immigrant mother from Mexico. "It was frightening to take him to the doctor, knowing he was sick, and not be able to tell the physician what I know – because I couldn't communicate much in English. That's when I knew I had to do something."

Lopez is one of nearly 200 adult students at DeNeuville Learning Center.

DeNeuville's volunteers and eight paid staff teachers offer free English as a Second Language classes (ESL) for local and immigrant women, as well as literacy, GED tutoring and employment

skills training such as computer classes.

"The women who are students here represent 14 or 15 different global nationalities as well as native-born citizens with literacy challenges," said Sister Lakshmie Napagoda, DeNeuville's director. A member of the Catholic order of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, Sister Lakshmie is an immigrant herself, a native of Sri Lanka.

"My native language is Sinhalese. I was shy to speak English at home myself in the beginning," said Sister Lakshmie. "I was afraid of making mistakes, as if I was starting life all over again. There were times I wanted to go back. However, I was blessed to have a family to encourage and support me."

Fear of mistakes is common

among DeNeuville's students, as well. DeNeuville's warm and encouraging staff and volunteers serve as surrogate family to women whose own relatives may be far away – or simply unable to offer support. By bolstering fragile self-esteem, DeNeuville's staff makes learning easier.

"Classes are smaller here," said native Memphian Iretta Hayes, who has found success in studying for math and English GED tests at DeNeuville, where she receives plenty of individual attention.

"In some GED programs, some students may be attending by a judge's court order and lack personal motivation. That can be distracting. Everyone who is here *wants* to be here," said Wilma Boyd, GED instructor at DeNeuville.

Hayes is one of several local women who also find individualized help in studying for GED tests at DeNeuville, as

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Native Memphian Iretta Hayes appreciates the individual assistance with GED studies that she finds at DeNeuville.



“It’s a wonderful atmosphere and I am inspired by the dedication of these women to their studies,” said Margaret Henze (right), who has volunteered as a teacher since DeNeuville first opened in 1998.

well as assistance in job skills training.

One much-loved DeNeuville staff member is Evelyn Williams, who is also a DeNeuville graduate. Williams’ sunny disposition adds a super-efficient and optimistic approach to every activity, from assisting the teaching staff to greeting visitors. She is right-hand assistant to the director, but refuses to claim any title but “chief bottle washer.”

“But (Evelyn) runs the place in my absence,” said

Sister Lakshmie.

“Evelyn greets everyone who comes to the door with a “come-on-down” Bob Barker imitation – and puts everyone at ease,” said Margaret Henze, who has been a DeNeuville volunteer teacher since the program first opened.

Now celebrating its eighth year of offering support and multiple forms of education to women, DeNeuville Learning Center has grown from helping 66 women in 1997 to more than 200 in 2005. Presently located in the

former convent site of St. Therese Little Flower Catholic Church, DeNeuville is a happy place – but crowded. Operations will eventually relocate to a new 8,000 square foot facility, near the intersection of Union and South Cooper. “A generous grant from the Assisi Foundation has made this possible, but we are still raising funds for renovations,” said Sister Lakshmie.

GED exams for DeNeuville students are set for January, so Lopez does not stop studying

for long. But the road doesn’t stop there. Once she obtains her certificate, Lopez has other goals in mind.

“Some day, I want to become a nurse,” said Lopez. “It’s a big goal, but I will get there.”

Until its relocation, DeNeuville Learning Center is based at 840 Dickinson St., adjacent to St. Therese Little Flower Catholic Church. For more information, visit deneuvillecenter.org or call 726-5902.