

# DeNeuville Learning Center

*Opening the World to Women*



Sister Lakshmi Napagoda, director of DeNeuville Learning Center for Women is standing in front of the Center located in Midtown Memphis behind St. Therese Little Flower Church.

by Ginger Porter

**N**ESTLED BEHIND ST. THERESE LITTLE FLOWER CHURCH IN MIDTOWN is a quaint little building with a cross on top. On a rainy morning, a tiger-striped cat noses at the door trying to get in. Even the kitty knows it is some type of sanctuary, or safe place. Women at a crossroads come here to DeNeuville Learning Center to equip themselves for changes in their lives—It is a safe place for them to learn and grow. ♦ "It is a quiet place. In a larger school or vocational center it is crowded and noisy and they are not able to concentrate on me. Here, they take time and help. I am not in a competition here. I learn at my own pace," said Tamka Ikagbara, a refugee from Nigeria assisted by Catholic Charities. ♦ The learning center is a metamorphosis of the ministry of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd of Memphis.



Students, Jeanine Messer, Tamka Ikagbara, and Brenda Lindsey learn computer skills.

Formerly, they worked with teenage girls through the DeNeuville Heights School for girls which closed in 1997 due to financial and staffing issues. After nearly 130 years in the city, the Bishop of Memphis, the Most Rev. Terry Steib, encouraged the sisters to stay in town. Their mission was redirected to focus on women wanting to make a difference in their lives. In 1998, with some help from the Assisi Foundation, the building at 840 Dickinson Street was renovated and the program started.

"We keep changing the program to accommodate student needs," said Sister Lakshmi Napagoda, director of DeNeuville. "We have chosen not to partner with some agencies because we don't want women coming here just because they are sent here. We want them to be here because they want to make a change."

Classes include typing, keyboarding, computer applications, intro to PCs, intro to the Internet, computer A+ certification, English as a second language (ESL), GED preparation, job search, sewing, parenting, anger management and individual and couple counseling.

Small classrooms, day and night classes and individual tutors are all available for a \$15 registration fee and the cost of books. The school boasts a 100 percent placement rate, with all of its graduates finding employment and some going on to college.

"It is just a gold mine. I come from a retail background and needed the computer skills. I am working toward a job as a bank teller, but after I complete

my courses, I could get a job in an office anywhere," said Jeannine Messer. "When I saw the cost and the flexible schedules, I knew this was right for me. When I get a job, I can still come at night and complete more courses."

The range of classes addresses not only women facing career changes, but at-risk populations as well, giving counsel and tools to handle life issues as well as educational issues.

A new literacy program at DeNeuville called Motherhead, accomplishes several

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goals. It reinforces reading and language skills, teaches values, encourages bonding and initiates a love of reading in children. A book focusing on values or issues pertinent to families, such as bonding, safety, or preparation for a new child, is read with moms in class. They discuss the book, emphasize values and relate subject matter to personal issues

These students are taking an English as a Second Language course.



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in their lives. Participants take the book home and read it to their children, then come back and share their experience with others in the class.

The center carries an average of about 80 students a semester and operates with 33 part-time volunteers, seven part-time staff, and Sr. Lakshmi, the full-time director. Instructors and volunteers include newly retired teachers or instructors wanting to work part time or give back in some way.

"The women here are an inspiration to me," said Margaret Pongetti, ESL instructor six years and formerly a teacher with the school for girls. "Their lives are not easy, but they come here each day with smiles on their faces. I receive more than I give."

John Hater, PhD, an industrial psychologist and early retiree from FedEx, started volunteering at the center in Jan-



Volunteer Margaret Brown, right, teaches science class to Jessica Olson, left, and Indira Genzales.

uary Hater learned about the program from a notice in his church bulletin and has found it to be a nice fit for his skills and experience gained in the corporate sector. He has developed a testing program for students to benchmark their level of education and diagnose their instructional needs.

"We have developed a tutorial to assist with the testing because lots of our students haven't ever completed a test, much less worked on a computer. After they've been here a while we can retest them for GED readiness. The evaluation component helps us with the statistics needed for grant writing," he said.

Grants, donations and fundraisers generate the money to run the center. DeNeuville holds several fundraisers throughout the year including a golf tournament, wine and cheese event and auction, a cookbook sale, and a mother's day gift basket sale. Year round efforts, such as penny collection and cancelled

commemorative stamp drives slowly bring in rewards for the industrious group.

"A collector from Canada gives us \$20 per pound for the stamps," said Sr. Lakshmi. "And, so far, we have collected over 19,500 pennies this year. It adds up."

Student Barbara Southwell, a veteran of several DeNeuville computer classes, can be seen climbing the stairs with jars of pennies. She came to the center to broaden her range of skills after becoming unemployed.

"I've probably learned more about myself than I have about the computer," she said. "I have a part-time job now and the first \$5 from each check goes back here. My dream is to become rich and



Sister Lakshmi Napagoda encourages women to attend DeNeuville because they want to make a change in their lives.

famous and set up an endowment for DeNeuville."

One student in an ESL class, Neireida Carolina Roque, brought in a pamphlet for translation and counsel from her instructor, Pongetti. It was from a local charity. She wanted to see if it was legitimate so she could give back as well.

This spirit pervades the center, with students learning generosity by example.

"It is inspiring to work at a place with the mission of DeNeuville," said Malcolm Pratt, computer teacher. "There is a holistic approach—they are trying to help so many in so many ways." ❧

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