



# Storefront school brings education to the community

Photos and Story by  
Aldo Blanco Photography Editor



Alina Ramos (left), Ruby Garcia (center) and Anastacia Lopez (right) take a coffee break from their ESL class. Lopez gives her instructor a glance after being told that their break is over.



Carlos Romero, manager of the West Chicago Community Education Center takes a call in his cramped office. Romero worked his way up from Dining Services to his current position.

## Easily overlooked, the college's West Chicago campus serves a diverse population

When thinking of education, the idea of an institution located in a strip mall might not sound too good; but for the West Chicago Community Education Center the location is ideal for the population that it serves. With only 2,800 square feet and three classrooms, the community center serves 675 students throughout the week.

"The peak time at the center is on weekdays from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.," supervisor Carlos Romero said. By 10 a.m. all classes were full and rolling. The classes ranged from ESL to GED preparation class.

Although mostly Hispanic, students range from Eastern Europe to Asia. "It is a multicultural center, students

range from many backgrounds," Romero said. Yet many of the students don't have a formal education and at times they can struggle. That's where the professionals come in. "The professionals will pair up with a struggling student and teach them study skills. This is a very close community and everyone helps everyone else," Romero said.

Romero indicated that some students are at times scared to come to class. Immigration and Customs Enforcement has been known to search out illegal immigrants in the West Chicago area; when this happens Romero indicated that students choose to stay in the safety of their own homes instead of coming to school.

One particular older

student is taking classes so she can stand up for herself and others in the packaging company she works at. "At my older age it is harder to learn the language, but I try little by little and the teacher helps me a lot," Audelia Mendez said in Spanish. "I want to learn, my boss changes my shift frequently and he also discriminates against me and other Hispanics. He gives preference to the American workers and abuses the immigrants. I just want to defend myself from the prejudices of the manager," Mendez said.

Many students are seeking a better life in this county and education is a form of empowerment. "If you are really looking for education, you can do it," Romero said.



Above: Student Aide Veronica Santoyo (right), and Administrative Assistant Debbie Black, joke about the size of the center.

Lower Left: Al Cornejo teaches GED students the basic skill to pass the test. His students are made up of multicultural individuals.

Lower Right: COD's West Chicago Center is located in Lorlyn Plaza off Roosevelt Road. The shopping center houses a Mexican grocery store and a laundromat as well as the new location of the center.

