



**UNTIL ITS CLOSING LAST YEAR, A NONDESCRIP SCHOOL BUILDING ON A HILL OVERLOOKING DOWNTOWN PITTSBURGH HAD BEEN A BEACON FOR IMMIGRANTS STRUGGLING TO LEARN ENGLISH. NOW, LOCAL FOUNDATIONS SEE THEIR AGENDAS FURTHERED BY KEEPING THE WELCOME LIGHT BURNING. BY GREGG RAMSHAW PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANNIE O'NEILL**



Lois Feldman, arms folded and full of confidence from nearly 25 years of teaching English to Pittsburgh's immigrants, is flanked by students (from left) Jiratchaya Muscari of Thailand, Mayang Bezner of Venezuela, and Leonid Brusilovskiy of Russia during a class break at the Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council's Downtown Center.

# NO adult. left behind

**F**rom her third-floor classroom at Connelley Tech, Lois Feldman offered her adult students two things: a commanding view of downtown Pittsburgh, and, if they worked at it, a command of the English language. For 24 years, Feldman conducted an English as Second Language class, known as ESL, at the Clifford B. Connelley Technical Institute and Adult Education Center, perched above the city and a giant portal to the Hill District.

But no more room with a view. Feldman now teaches her class on the fifth floor of an office building several blocks away. The old Chamber of Commerce building at Seventh and Smithfield is Duquesne Light Co.'s headquarters, but it's also home to the Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council's new Downtown Center.

When it was built in 1929, Connelley was an education landmark—a nationwide model for vocational training. Now it is an almost-vacant shell, most of its contents having been auctioned off in July.

On a brighter day last summer, Feldman was teaching an intermediate ESL class and showed students a birthday card featuring a dairy cow and the phrase “Have a moo-vah-less birthday.” The students—Russian, Japanese, Moldavian, Chinese and Indian—were stumped as she tried to explain that “moo-vah-less” is an almost-homonym for “marvelous.” Finally, the pun registered and there were some chuckles. “That’s American humor—for better or for worse,” she warned them, in relating the quick culture lesson to language studies.

From its origins in the 1930s as a vocational school for boys to its later role beginning in the 1970s as an adult-education center, Connelley gave men and women from outside the American mainstream education system the tools to find good-paying jobs to support themselves and their families.



## Alex Ryzhik

Russian immigrant  
turned caterer and grocer  
ETHNIC FOOD, SQUIRREL HILL

“Certainly none had ESL programs as good as Connelley’s,” says Gerald Balbier, the Endowments’ senior program officer for education. “This wasn’t just a nice thing to do to acclimate newcomers. We need to preserve programs like English instruction that support immigrants and may attract others.”

The Literacy Council had the infrastructure, so the Endowments stepped forward in December with a \$100,000 grant to help the council replace the academic parts of the Connelley program. The board renewed that grant last month.

A major Endowments goal is to get people from other countries to come to western Pennsylvania, join the workforce and help generate economic opportunity in the region. In the last 15 years, the Endowments has awarded nearly \$4.6 million to programs designed to attract and retain immigrants.

Other foundations — Eden Hall, Buhl, Equitable Resources and the Urban Affairs philanthropy of the United Jewish Federation — also have boosted the Literacy Council’s Downtown Center project. Private funding, including the Endowments grant, for the center’s start-up totals \$225,000. That sum and a \$400,000 allotment from state government have enabled the council to hire teachers, buy materials, and lease, renovate and equip office space.

“We thought it was important to be close to the Connelley building,” says Literacy Council Executive Director Don Block. “People had built a pattern of going there... and we wanted to make it an easy transition. It was essential that the center be on a major bus route. The private funding made the facility possible.”

Since the city school board established an adult-learning center at Connelley in 1971, some 46,000 adult students have graduated from the acronym soup of programs: ABE, Adult Basic Education, the basic academic and life skills most people need to survive; GED, General Educational Development diploma, the equivalent of a high school diploma for those who dropped out or never completed the traditional four-year program; and ESL, which helps immigrants learn the language of their new homeland.

These students attended Connelley days, nights and weekends, mostly free, with the visible promise of Pittsburgh stretched out before them in office buildings, retail stores, factories and universities.



Victor Beltrán moved to the city from Peru 15 years ago, an architect with no money and no English language skills. He took the only ESL class he could afford — the one offered at Connelley for no cost. He now works for Astorino, one of the city’s leading building and design firms.

H.J. Heinz Co. executives brought Eliezar Sanchez, 37, a food-processing engineer at its Venezuela plant, to Pittsburgh about a decade ago. He learned English at Connelley and earned one master’s degree in business administration and another in environmental science at Duquesne University. Today he travels around the world as an associate food technologist for Del Monte.

But despite a long list of such testimonials and an impressive record of academic achievement in decades of service to the city, Connelley could not be sustained.

Enrollment declined as immigration and the city’s population growth slowed. Employment needs shifted away from traditional skilled trades, and state legislators and policymakers found other uses for such funds. Last year, then—Pittsburgh Public Schools Superintendent John Thompson finally pulled the plug. Connelley’s adult academic programs and its 75-year-old vocational-education facilities were shut down.

“You really couldn’t blame him,” Joseph Poerio, Jr., Connelley’s last director, says of Thompson. “The public schools’ mandate is to educate children, pre-kindergarten through 12th grade. Although I hated to see the place close, adults are not really the Board of Education’s responsibility when you get right down to it.”

That argument had been kicking around for several years, it turns out. In 1986, a study by the Pennsylvania Economy League concluded that Pittsburgh school district taxpayers should not pay for Connelley’s adult program. One author of the report wrote that Pittsburgh may have been the only school district east of the Mississippi River supporting such an arrangement.

Two years after the study, Pennsylvania Sen. John Heinz was heading a Republican task force on job-training programs and

Donald G. Block, the Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council’s executive director for the past 21 years, talks with staff members at the Literacy Council’s Downtown Center. Before heading the Pittsburgh organization, Block ran a similar adult literacy program for a four-county rural area north of the city.



made it clear he didn’t like government’s abandonment of adult education. ESL teacher Carol Schutte, who taught 30 years at Connelley, remembers several visits by Heinz. “He’d always walk up from downtown unaccompanied. He’d trudge up the stairs, shake hands with teachers and students and talk with them, and then walk back downtown.”

In one of his meetings with Pittsburgh school board members, Heinz vowed to “do all in [his] power to see that appropriate federal funds are made available to support [Connelley’s] vital mission.”

“He was instrumental in keeping us open,” Feldman recalls. Connelley survived another 16 years.

As the inevitable loomed in recent years, Endowments officials recognized the need to make an investment in a successor to Connelley to keep its academic courses going. Local community colleges and trade schools would fill the void left by the closing of Connelley’s vocational programs.

The Literacy Council’s Block took the initiative, asking the Endowments to endorse his bid for the state and federal monies that had been funding the Connelley program. Block applied to state education officials, and the Literacy Council received the \$400,000 grant to restart Connelley’s adult-learning program at a new location. The money was a state allocation of federal adult-education funds.

The Downtown Center, open since January, has five classrooms that can each hold up to 20 students. The facility also has a computer lab, carrels for one-to-one tutoring and some offices for staff.

Officials with other foundations that gave grants to the center say they view preserving the former Connelley programs as important for Pittsburgh's future. Its work with immigrants is particularly attractive to the United Jewish Federation, which has a long history of resettling Jews from other countries in the Pittsburgh area.

"We feel that the vibrancy of our city is well served by the infusion of diverse constituencies and that immigration is an important driver of that vibrancy," says Estelle Comay, a member of the federation's Urban Affairs Foundation board. "This in an endeavor that we are committed to, feel very strongly about and want to continue for whatever population, Jewish and non-Jewish, that comes to Pittsburgh."

On a Tuesday morning in June, there are two ESL classes in progress. The students and their teachers sit casually in circles in bright, functional rooms. In one class, Danielle Evonich, a full-time salaried instructor, is asking her students simple questions: "When is your birthday? How many people are in your family? What color eyes do you have? Who is sitting next to you?"

As part of this exercise, the students write down the answers and then try to formulate a reply in English. This is considered a high beginners class. Evonich's students are from Sudan, Turkey, Congo, Morocco, Japan, Russia, Albania and Korea. They've been in the United States for anywhere from 10 months to six years. Only the Japanese student says she plans to return home.

In a GED class, volunteer Joy Weatherwax, an aspiring writer on hiatus from full-time employment, sits next to 35-year-old Theresa Thornton as they work on word problems in math. The mother of two teenagers, Thornton readily describes herself as a recovering substance abuser with only a 10th-grade education, but she now wants to complete her secondary education so she can go back to work. Alex Dow, the 28-year-old director of the center, estimates that 30 percent of its GED or

Adult Basic Education students have had criminal or drug abuse problems.

"Mention my name in your article and maybe someone will want to hire me," Thornton says with a confident grin.

Literacy Council staffers say student achievement is at its best and most consistent in the ESL program. "ESL students are the most determined of the adult-learning students," says Greg Mims, the council's public relations director.

One explanation could be that those students may be more motivated and have less troubled backgrounds. Maria Urbandt, 42, spoke no English when she came to the United States with her surgeon husband from their native Argentina in 2003. Private schools and even University of Pittsburgh classes were not as helpful, she says, as the Connelley program. "I can pay anywhere, but the best teachers are here. Here we learn from scratch... the language and the culture. It's not the same at other places, where you just get the language and not necessarily the culture."

There has been a high demand for the center's services since Connelley closed, Dow says. "We could have an even larger program. We're getting a large draw from all over the city. And we haven't had to turn anyone away." Replacing the academic classes offered by Connelley now consumes about 20 percent of the Literacy Council's program operations. The \$400,000 state allocation is good through the end of next June but then must be renewed.

The Literacy Council's Block, a soft-spoken man with a salt-and-pepper beard, contemplates the future of adult education as he sits in the Literacy Council's main offices in East Liberty, a still somewhat rundown part of town, where blight and urban renewal co-exist amid new construction and empty buildings and storefronts.

He questions some of the boundaries set up by those trying to improve public education systems for children. "Doesn't a public school board have a vested interest in adult education and literacy? Adults who are dropouts and go back and get their GEDs raise kids who do better in school. They don't repeat the pattern of illiteracy," he says.



## Victor Beltrán

Peruvian immigrant  
turned architect

ASTORINO, DOWNTOWN

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should be left behind, either!” he shouted. That line drew cheers.

Despite the fervor of the organizers, the rally generated little publicity in Pittsburgh and none in Washington, even though a funding slash of such magnitude presents a huge challenge for nonprofit organizations and philanthropists.

“Private donors don’t want to be surrogates for what they believe is the government’s responsibility,” says Block. “We have excellent rapport with private donors; we have their support. But we can’t expect them to substitute their funds for the government’s.”

Block says he hopes the enrollment numbers will make the case for continued funding from the state. By July, the new center had 398 students.

Clearly, with funding in place, there is strong evidence that more students will graduate from the program and return the public-education investment many times

That view was advanced noisily this year by more than 100 demonstrators on a sun-drenched first day of summer. Local adult literacy providers organized a lunchtime rally in the west courtyard of the Carnegie Library in Oakland to call attention to announced 75 percent cuts in federal spending for adult education. In Pennsylvania, that would mean a drop from \$19.3 million this year to \$4.8 million next year.

Joe Moyo, who arrived in the United States from Zimbabwe in 1963 and now is director of the academic department at Bidwell Training Center, was one of several speakers who exhorted the crowd. “If no child should be left behind, no adult

over into the regional economy. Alex Ryzhik, 54, of Greenfield, a Russian immigrant who spent two years at Connelley studying English in the 1990s, attended ESL class in the morning and worked as a dishwasher, waiter and bartender at night. In the decade since, he’s built a booming catering business, banquet hall and ethnic food store in Squirrel Hill.

He’s grateful for the encouragement Feldman and Schutte gave him as he struggled with a new language in a new country. “They were very, very good teachers,” says Ryzhik. “Only in the United States could this happen, believe me. I love this country.” *h*