

RECONNECTING THROUGH LANGUAGE

Friends, family strengthen ties in native tongues

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The streets of Toledo once were alive with the buzzing of foreign tongues.

Immigrants settling in places like the Polish Village around Lagrange Street or Birmingham neighborhoods on the east side used their native languages - to each other and their children.

But that tradition didn't always continue. Often, parents urged their children to speak English like other Americans.

"When I grew up, they spoke it but they never asked us to respond. ... It was kind of a quiet thing. People didn't want to expose their background," said Carol LaBounty, 70, whose mother and grandmother spoke Hungarian at home.



Chrissy Li-Mocek with her father, Thomas Li, who is from China. She is studying Chinese to be able to speak to him in his native language. (THE BLADE/JEREMY WADSWORTH)

Now, at a time that some lawmakers are pushing to make English the country's official language, a few area residents are going in the opposite direction, trying to rediscover their roots through other languages.

For Ms. LaBounty, it meant a chance to do something she'd always longed for.

"I always thought it would be nice to be able to converse with my mom [in Hungarian]," she said.

It can be tough to find classes these days. Many universities and community colleges don't offer a lot of these more unusual languages, especially after years of budget cuts. Those that do exist may not be right for everyone reconnecting to their roots.

"A real course is going to involve a lot of information that people who are interested in their heritage don't care about," said Debra Stoudt, a professor in foreign languages at the University of Toledo.

Getting a personal tutor or working with an ethnic organization may make more sense because it can focus on one's particular interests, she said.

Ms. LaBounty was fortunate to meet a young Hungarian man, Gabor Balazs, who moved to the area and teaches small classes. Four years after beginning his weekly lessons, which include grammar and music, the Perrysburg Township woman is still hooked.

"I never miss my class," she said. "We just don't do pure language. We all share our own histories with each other, where our families came from, what you remember. We're all interested in the history of it."

When she visited Szeged - Toledo's sister city in Hungary - she was delighted to be able to read the street signs and carry on brief conversations.

Tom Jesionowski had a chance to show off his Polish skills during two visits to Poland, but the language he's learning comes in handy every week here in town when he attends Mass given in Polish at St. Adalbert Catholic Church.

"It kind of reminds me of my grandparents, because back when they went to church, it was a Polish Mass," the 64-year-old man said.

His grandparents came from Poland and taught him the language as a child. But his parents didn't speak it.

"They wanted to get away from the stigma of being basically Polish," said Mr. Jesionowski, of Monclova Township.

Years later, he decided to relearn it to get more in touch with his heritage, starting with lessons at church and now through the Polish Roman Catholic Union of America on Detroit Avenue.

"I don't actually speak it fluently but I can speak it enough to get by and I can basically understand what's going on," he said.



Carol LaBounty, right, is learning to speak Hungarian, the native language of her mother, Cleanor Rajner, so she can better understand her heritage. (THE BLADE/AMY E. VOIGT)

"Poland has a wonderful history and rich traditions, and I hate to see them die off," he continued. "I tried to teach my grandsons. They've got other things to keep them busy."

George Arvanitis, 47, knows the feeling, but from the opposite perspective. When he was young, his father, who came from Greece, tried to teach him about Greek culture.

"My dad tried to on many occasions and I just wasn't interested," the West Toledo man said.

It wasn't until Mr. Arvanitis was an adult with children of his own that it became important. In the last 18 months, he's started attending services at Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Cathedral, joined the choir, and began classes offered through the church to learn Greek.

"I plunged right in," he said. "I remembered everything from when I was a little boy. It came back."

Learning a language can be tough going and quite a commitment. This fall, though, he'll be sure to have someone familiar at his side - his 16-year-old daughter, Rachel, who recently traveled to Greece and will start Greek classes.

"I'll have somebody at home to speak Greek with," Mr. Arvanitis said with a smile.

Chrissy Li-Moczek, 28, of Springfield Township, signed up this fall for a Chinese class at Owens Community College, where she's a pre-health major.

"I thought Chinese would be a good one because I'd be able to talk to my dad," she said.

Thomas Li, 52, was born in China and owns Pearl River, an area restaurant.

"I thought it would be neat. It makes him happy," Mrs. Li-Moczek said.

Learning language to connect with the past can have religious ties too.

Kathryn Gallon, 66, of Sylvania Township, has taken Hebrew through Congregation Etz Chayim and the Toledo Board of Jewish Education.

"I'm a convert. Part of learning and participating in the synagogue is to learn the language, both the written and the spoken," she said. "I feel like you're more involved in the service when you can read the prayers yourself."

Another convert, Prudence Hicks, is learning Arabic to get closer to her religion, Islam.

"I wanted to read the Koran in Arabic," the Toledo resident said. "It's God's language."

She's been taking lessons through the Islamic Center of Greater Toledo for the past two years, and plans to continue until she's fluent.

"You recite it, and it's like your heart is beating to the rhythm of it," she said.

And so these languages live, though in some cases their future in Toledo is not always assured.

That's why Ms. LaBounty would like to revitalize local traditions that have faded away, such as a Christmas play performed in Hungarian, a language of which she's truly proud.

"There's no other language like it," she said. "It's very, very difficult. Chinese and Hungarian are the two most difficult languages to learn."

But in Toledo, she continued, "it will die unless we can get the younger people. This is what we've been talking about. We need to talk about some way we can get the younger people interested in the language."

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