

TIDINGS

Durango & Cortez Adult Education Center Spring 2022 Newsletter

Far from Home, Closer to Happiness

*a father resettles his
family in the U.S.*

HOME IS A PLACE Wilber Ortiz has not visited since 2017. Legal barriers block him and his wife, Carolina, from seeing their parents, siblings, and friends some 3,100 miles away.

"I love Columbia," Wilber sighs with a smile. "I like to return to visit my father, my mother, my sisters. It's very sad. Last year, my grandfather died and we could not visit. The grandmother of my wife died two years ago, and we could not visit."

The only way Wilber can visit home is through his memories and through old pictures stored on his phone. In one photograph, Wilber sits astride a chestnut horse. The surrounding landscape is bucolic and lush with vegetation. Cattle graze around him.

"That is my passion!" He punches the word passion with extra oomph.

Although Wilber has been taking English-as-a-Second Language classes at the Durango Adult Education Center for six years, he can get bashful about speaking English, especially when the right English word doesn't come swiftly enough. He loses no time finding the right word to characterize his feelings for being a veterinarian.

He prepared for his career at a university in Columbia, where he also met Carolina. He specialized in treating large animals and livestock. Over the years, Wilber worked the gamut of animal needs, from surgeries to inseminations to antibiotic injections. Meanwhile, his wife followed in her

father's footsteps and pursued a career in journalism. The couple welcomed their first daughter into the world and dreamed of an idyllic future.

Wilber yearned to own some land and grow old, surrounded by his family and lots of animals. These were mighty aspirations for a young man from very meager beginnings. When he was born, his parents owned nothing. They had no roof over their heads. Some years later, the government granted Wilber's father four acres to cultivate crops including cacao, tomatoes, and passion fruit—to this day, Wilber's absolute favorite fruit!



Wilber Ortiz (right) with wife, Carolina, and their two daughters are carving out a new life in the U.S.

But when the political sands in Columbia shifted, the ground fell out from under those dreams. Corrupt leaders and business moguls targeted the journalists exposing their crimes. Carolina's father was among those persecuted. After he was assassinated, she and Wilber agreed they had to seek asylum in the U.S.

Moving to a new country has imposed many undue challenges on the couple. For instance, their degrees and professional credentials were rendered useless, which forced them into low-wage, low-skilled jobs. Both needed to swiftly boost their English language skills. Carolina discovered the free classes available at the DAEC and immediately enrolled them both.

Wilber was very nervous about attending ESL classes. He explains, "In Columbia, when I studied in the school, I was no good for English. Never! The teacher called my mother. *Hey, your son will not pass. He is no good for English!*" He brushed off the failure at the time. So what if he bombed his English courses?! It's not like he was ever going to wind up living in the U.S.

"In Columbia the teachers are very—" Wilber demonstrates by smacking a fist into the palm of his hand. WHACK!

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From the Director

No doubt, these past two years will go down in history as the most trying in a generation. Nonetheless, we ever-hopeful humans look forward to the renewal of spring and all its promise. I feel amazed by and grateful for the trials and the blessings.

I am also thankful to be working in education, empowered by a mission to care for and educate our populace. This organization strives to see the most disadvantaged community members grow, to gain expertise and knowledge which enhances their lives, and to discover those pathways leading to a fulfilling life.



Susan Hakanson, Executive Director

Every year, your generosity creates an educational safety net for individuals improving their lives. Last year stands out as exceptional because over one-third of our local supporters more than doubled either their annual or monthly gifts! Additionally, more than 150 new donors joined your heroic ranks, investing for the first time in this area's literacy.

Our volunteers also stepped up their efforts during these truly trying times. While they donated over 400 hours to assist student learning, the benefits of that assistance are utterly incalculable. For instance, tutoring English language learners gives them the lifelong gift of reading and communicating with their neighbors, employers, and their children's teachers. As you may have gleaned from Wilber Ortiz's feature story, the services provided through our Center broadly benefits entire families.

Help also went to our high school equivalency students, resulting in 104 passing test scores for the GED exams. Elton Beletso and every student like him that successfully completes all four subject tests not only earns a high school equivalent diploma, but also catapults towards enriching and rewarding future opportunities that would have been otherwise off limits.

We all know that education is the best investment we can make because it yields the highest financial and societal returns. Therefore, if we are to walk this earth at this time, beset by these challenges, let it also be under these Colorado-blue skies, abounded by all the splendors of the Four Corners and its communities. And let it be in lockstep with compassionate teaching leading to literacy for all.

Susan



Far from Home continued...



His stern expression melts into a smile. "But no, not Michelle," he says of Michelle Hall, ESL teacher in Durango. "I love Michelle. She's very nice!"

It's not just nice teachers. There's something else he wants to praise, but he is not sure of the English word for it. He pulls out his phone and uses Google Translate to find it. Pedagogy—the methods of teaching. "The pedagogy for studying English is very good."

Wilber and Carolina now have two daughters, a six-year-old and a one-year-old. The couple works long hours to support their growing family. For instance, Wilber works for La Plata County Humane Society most days. He also cleans offices most nights. On top of that, he attends his ESL classes. He is grateful the classes are free. Any extra expenditure would not fit his budget.

Although Wilber isn't working as a veterinarian—and could not do so unless he started his education all over in the U.S.—he enjoys being at the LPCHS. He gets to be around animals. If all goes well with bureaucratic paper flows, he and Carolina might be able to attain the green card status they need to then briefly travel home and see their families. And Wilber is fully aware that the more his English improves, the more opportunities he will have to inch closer back to the dreams he left behind.

"In my job, when I speak more with other people, it is good for my English. Practice, practice. Pronunciation and listening," he says.

Having recently bought a house on a small plot of land near Elmore's Corner, Wilber is steadily getting closer to the happy place he left behind in Columbia.



The Impact of Your Support

Success Has Many Fathers; Failure Is an Orphan

a single father seeks to inspire his sons and serve those in need

“THE LAST GRADE I COMPLETED was eighth grade,” Elton Beletso confesses when asked why completing his education at the Adult Education Center in Cortez was the best choice.

“I went through ninth grade about four times. The last time, I had to just...just swallow it and withdraw. I couldn’t keep kidding myself. I was seventeen at the time.”

Through his mom’s ancestry, Elton is Navajo or Diné. He moved around a lot while growing up. He was in and out of at least eight different schools. “It was easy to let go of education as a priority,” he explains.

After dropping out of school, he went to work. This pathway mapped closer to his family’s experiences with education. Attaining a diploma was never high on anyone’s list of priorities in his familial circles. Perhaps not surprisingly, only one of Elton’s siblings and his mother actually attained diplomas.

On the whole, his family valued getting a job and paying the bills. “Getting to work. Pay your bills. That’s it,” Elton says. “I did that before for a long time. Now, I’m just running in a circle. Running in the same circle of minimum wage and small unemployment gaps. But I have three kids in my circle so it’s not going to work like that.”

First and foremost, Elton wants to be an inspiration to his three sons, ages 15, 12, and nine.

“I want to be an example for them. With education, I want them to know there’s no limit. There’s just no limit,” he says.

The boys genuinely enjoy having their dad in school. Elton notes, “We can sit down at the dinner table and I’ll go over some of my notes. They want to see what I’m doing. And some of what they’re doing is close. Like they’re learning fractions. So we help each other.”

Since Elton began high school equivalency (HSE) classes in September 2021, he has already passed his Science test. “That really blew me away!” he laughs.

He now faces Social Studies and the two biggest, longest, and (some say) hardest subjects: Math and Reading & Language Arts. His practice tests indicate he is ready, but Elton is taking some additional time prepare. He releases an anxious exhale when he says, “I just want to be sure!”

Elton has every reason to be skeptical. Besides his discouraging high school experience, two previous GED programs fizzled for him.

“There was never any interaction of showing me where I’m at or letting them know where I am at, or even strong points. I felt as if it was my fault; that I couldn’t do this,” Elton says.

By contrast, his teachers at the AEC provide clear assessments of progress and strengths. He attests, “I know where I’m at now. Now that I see a whole different structure in the GED program, I feel differently. It wasn’t my fault.”

Long term, Elton’s career goals sprout directly from his personal misfortunes. He hopes to return to doing social work and adult outreach. “I loved that job,” he says. “I loved that I actually had resources at my fingertips. I was able to help people move along in what they wanted to do.”

However, he aspires to do so much more than simply make referrals. “My dream job...I don’t know if this sounds crazy, but I would want to open a program that helps adults...especially males that have been in my position. My children and I were homeless. We stayed in my car. There’s no help. There’s no help for a single father. There’s women’s and children’s shelters. But there’s a lot of single fathers out there wondering what to do? Where to go? There’s certain things that run through their heads—they ran through my head. Like, am I gonna get discriminated against...again!? Am I gonna be put down? Or even just set aside.”



Single father Elton loves riverside playdays with his sons.

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2021 Benchmarks

260

total learners served

197

learners studied English
or for GED

104 GED tests received passing scores at our Centers and the jail.
16 students achieved a GED (high school equivalent diploma).

59 students representing 13 countries learned English.

121 individuals recieved career & support services through the
BOOST Program. Additionally, 31 learners were awarded over
\$52,000 in scholarships for early childhood
education training.

23 women entrepreneurs received over \$16,000 in assistance.

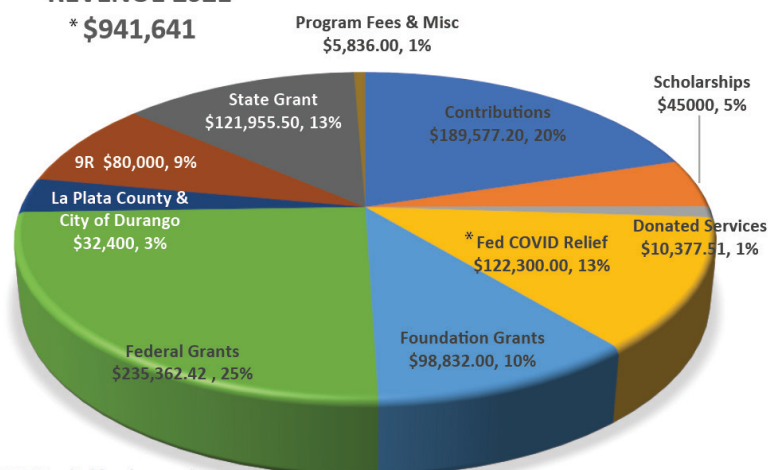
177 career certification and
licensure tests were administered
at our public testing center.

Volunteers donated
405
service hours.

2021 Finances

REVENUE 2021

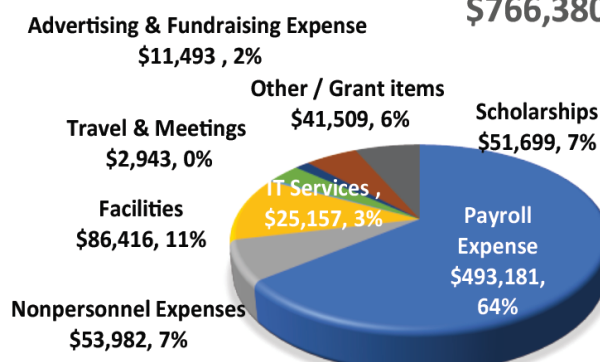
* \$941,641



*COVID relief funds were forgiven
as grants in 2021, received to cover 2020 & 2021 COVID related expenses and salaries.

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\$766,380



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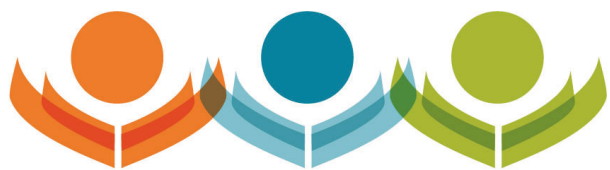
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Please consider donating today. Join a community that values literacy by investing in the next 35 years of educational equity!



Adult Education Center

Serving Southwest Colorado

701 Camino del Rio, Ste. 301
Durango, CO 81301

35th
Anniversary
1987-2022

Upcoming Events

Wednesday, June 1st, 6:00pm

Durango HSE Graduation Ceremony

Thursday, June 2nd, 6:00pm

Cortez HSE Graduation Ceremony

Monday, July 5th

Summer classes begin

September TBD

Literacy Luncheon

Our Mission

The Durango Adult Education Center, a caring learning community, fills educational gaps by providing the skills and knowledge necessary for livable wage careers, post-secondary education, and social and economic mobility.



Success Has Many Fathers continued...

He takes a deep breath here, then goes on, "You don't feel good about it."

To anyone facing setbacks, Elton offers encouragement, noting, "Your reality is what you make it to be. If you want there to be a change, you will have to do it. Do not just give up. Find it in yourself. Don't overlook yourself. Hope, happiness, safety...don't overlook those parts of your life."

To be sure, Elton is not overlooking the significance of his sacrifices and his hard work. "Knowing and feeling inside myself that I'm able to do these things for my children; that I'm able to make sure they're okay, to make sure they're safe, they get to go to school, they get to have these fulfillments...with the GED, I believe I can."



Save the dates! The Adult Education Center will host in-person **Spring Graduation Ceremonies** at its Durango and Cortez campuses on **June 1st & 2nd, 2022** (respectively) at **6:00pm**.