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Doing hard work of the mind

Immigrants see life is more than labor

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After mopping floors and scrubbing toilets, janitor Julio Pina takes a break and escapes into the world of Sartre and Plato. The Mexican immigrant joins friends at a cafe and, for the first time, uses his newfound knowledge to ponder history's great thinkers.

For several months, a small core of Mexican immigrants, many still clad in work clothes stained with dirt and paint, have convened at the Gads Hill Center, 1919 W. Cullerton St., for a grueling curriculum of college-level humanities classes, including history, literature and writing.

Many of the students never finished high school. For a long time, they have viewed their role in Chicago as that of hard workers with strong backs. No one cared about their minds.

On Sunday, however, that changed when a diehard group of 10 students graduated from the Odyssey Project at a ceremony at the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum.

"I like to say I'm a professional at cleaning bathrooms. But that is it," said Pina, 36, of Chicago. "I have never had the time or the chance to think. Until now."

Odyssey initially targeted African-American students and English-speaking Latinos, but this graduating class is the first eligible for college credit after taking courses entirely in Spanish. As Chicago sees an increased population of Mexican immigrants with low education levels, the Odyssey Project reflects a growing feeling by educators that they must expand learning opportunities, even in Spanish.

Earl Shorris, a writer and University of Chicago graduate, founded the Clemente Course in the humanities in 1995 at **Bard College** in New York. Educators have brought humanities courses to hundreds of low-income students in five states and the District of Columbia, including local courses offered by the Illinois Humanities Council.

In a recent class, the students literally sat on the edges of their seats as philosophy instructor Carlos Briones walked them through existentialism. They furiously scribbled notes and peppered him with questions.

To them, these are not esoteric topics. When Briones considers the idea of free will, the questions turn to their participation in immigrant-rights marches in March and May that brought massive crowds into Chicago's streets.

Briones said some philosophers say one's humanity is tied to a person's ability to make choices-- a feeling that some of the students have lost as they ponder the sad inevitability of a life in poverty, far from home.

"You chose to come to the United States," Briones said. "You choose to work where you work. Maybe you will choose to march. You are the product of all the choices you make."

By choosing to take college-level courses, the students are flying in the face of depressing data about the education levels of Mexican immigrants in the Chicago area.

Only one-third of Mexican immigrants 25 and older have high school diplomas, compared with 62 percent of all immigrants and 86 percent of native-born residents, according to Roosevelt University researchers. Just 3.4 percent of Mexican immigrants in Chicago have a bachelor's degree or higher.

Marcelo Diaz, an electrician, dropped out of college in Mexico City to come to Chicago in the 1980s. He expected to work for a year to earn enough money to buy a car. He never went back.

One of the class' most inquisitive students, Diaz prefaces each question with a pleading "Maestro?" or "Teacher?" He said he cried after receiving his certificate Sunday, marveling at the energy in the room from all of those who value education.

"I know better things are going to happen for me," he said. "I feel like I can do anything." More important, Diaz said the courses have given him a new identity and voice.

He said a contractor once mockingly asked him how many millions.

"He and I have the same brain," Diaz said, still fuming. "The only difference is that his uncle had millions of dollars and he was able to build an empire.

"What I can do is try to build a little empire up here," he said, pointing to his head.

Amy Thomas Elder, director of the Illinois Odyssey Project, said she hears from students on the elevated train reading a book on Greek philosophy and drawing stares that essentially say: "Why are you reading that?" Elder said acquiring knowledge can be an empowering experience, even if it doesn't directly change their lives.

"I don't believe in self-esteem for its own sake," Elder said. "But this does make people see

themselves differently. Their lives are richer even if their material situation isn't."

The Odyssey Project represents a growing feeling by Chicago educators that Mexican immigrants cannot simply be written off and should be pushed to re-enter the classroom.

Since opening a satellite campus in Chicago in 2001, for example, the Autonomous National University of Mexico has awarded bachelor's degrees and high-school diplomas to Mexican immigrants taking classes in Spanish. The university also is a partner in the Spanish-language Odyssey Project.

Odyssey initially had poor results in trying to reach Hispanic students by offering classes in English in North Lawndale. Then coordinators tried again--this time in Spanish. Students are not required to have finished high school, but they must have sufficient language skills to read a newspaper in Spanish.

To qualify, students must be low-income, making less than \$14,000 a year. The classes are free, and organizers provide child care and even CTA cards, helping those who might be juggling multiple jobs or have no income to spare.

As they graduate, these students see the classes as a beginning, not as a completed task.

"I have aspirations, my friend," Pina said. "I am not quitting here."