

# An Institute for Latins in Manhattan

By FRANK EMBLEN

**T**WENTY-FIVE years ago two teachers with a dream and \$500 found three students and started a school — the Spanish-American Institute. Today that school, a few steps from Times Square, opens the door of the English-speaking world to nearly 3,000 people a year, many of them native Americans.

"We were totally ignorant of the business world or we would never have done it," said David Schiffman, associate director of the institute, who came up with his \$250 by borrowing on his G.I. insurance. "That's right," said his partner, Frank J. Ferraro, director of

## 25-year-old school off Times Square specializes in English for Hispanic students

the institute. "Today we would know enough not to try it."

The institute, which teaches business courses as well as English as a second language, now occupies 15,000 square feet on the second floor of the Paramount Building, 215 West 43d Street. And Mr. Ferraro and Mr. Schiffman no longer teach. They have 22 full-time and 26 part-time instructors, and the school has 30,000 alumni.

"There's nothing like doing the right thing at the right time," said Mr. Ferraro as he sat at his desk recently in a spacious office at the institute. "Teaching English to the Spanish-speaking was a whole new field then. People were there and nobody was servicing them."

Mr. Ferraro and Mr. Schiffman, both now 55 years old, were in the same graduating class at New Utrecht High School in Brooklyn. After military service in World War II, they became reacquainted as graduate students at New York University, where both earned master's degrees in English. Then both became instructors at Fairleigh Dickinson University.

When they started the institute in 1955, their three students paid tuition of \$10 each a week.

From three classrooms and the three students, the school has grown to 23 classrooms and more than 850 students on any school day, which starts at 9:15 A.M. and ends at 9:14 P.M.

Part of the school's appeal is the intimacy of small classes, its students say. "I knew a girl who went to another school," said Mercedes Russo, part of a class of seven in Spanish stenography.

"She didn't like it because she wasn't learning there so she came here with me." Miss Russo, who immigrated from the Dominican Republic seven months ago, wants to be a bilingual secretary.

Most of the students are Hispanic and Mr. Ferraro, who is of Italian descent, and Mr. Schiffman, who is Jewish, spoke with affection about the cultural traits and traditions of their students.

But some Latin-American traditions cause problems.

"When a student goes for a job interview, she just can't take her mother, aunt and cousin with her," Mr. Ferraro said. "I have to explain that an employer here just wouldn't understand."

The youngest students at the school are 17 and on occasion a mother will insist on accompanying a daughter to and from school.

"A mother asked if she could wait for her daughter in the student lounge," Mr. Ferraro recalled. The mother held court there for six months.

Just as some daughters who are students come with their mothers, so some mothers who are students bring along their daughters. Right now at least four mothers bring children, age 6 to 8, to typing class, Mr. Ferraro said.

The institute's oldest student is Francisco Cabrera, 92. His file shows that he was born in Havana on Jan. 29, 1888. It also shows that he has been absent only twice in five months and that he is not only studying English but also taking the course for the high-school-equivalency examination.

"He says he wants to learn English so he can enjoy movies and TV," Mr. Ferraro said. "He wants to live all of life, not just half."

Spanish is the native language of 75 percent of the institute's students and four out of five of these Spanish speakers are foreign born. The rest are Puerto Ricans.

Of the 25 percent of the student body that is not Spanish-speaking, Japanese make up the largest segment, followed by Italians, Haitians, Thais and Iranians. Of the native-Spanish-speaking students, those from the Dominican Republic make up the largest single group, Mr. Ferraro said, followed by Colombians, Venezuelans and Ecuadorians.

All English classes are taught in English. The secretarial courses are taught in both English and Spanish.

Teaching English to the foreign born is the No. 1 mission of the institute. Next comes the secretarial and skills courses, then the course to prepare for high school equivalency and finally one on operation of keypunch machines.

Twenty percent of the students use the institute as a steppingstone to more training or an academic education.

Jorge Ferrandiz and Ruben Mayungo both hope to go to college, for example. Mr. Ferrandiz, who arrived

Ruth Lopez taking typing at Spanish American Institute as daughter, Sandra, does homework while waiting for her to finish.



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from Spain a year ago, wants to study computer science at either New York University or Hunter College. Mr. Mayungo, who immigrated from Colombia eight months ago, plans to attend a community college in February. Both students are enrolled in high-school-equivalency classes and are studying advanced English at the institute.

Elena Romero, who arrived from Colombia a month ago, aspires to be a lawyer. Miss Romero, who studied English in her native country, is taking English and Spanish stenography, typing and business English classes.

"Many of the people who come here are fully competent in office skills or are fully qualified nurses or beauticians in their own countries, but it does not do them any good because they don't know English," Mr. Ferraro said.

To change that — to gain a working knowledge of English — the school has found that the average student must come to class four hours a day, five days a week, at a cost ranging from \$1.66 to \$2.12 per hour of instruction.

Many students support themselves in low-paying jobs in the garment district, which is one reason the institute has always been in the Times Square area, near the clothing center and well served by public transportation.

The biggest difference in operating the school now compared with the early days, Mr. Ferraro said, is the growing

ease of student placement. "We get 10 to 12 calls a week from employers looking for people who speak Spanish," he said. "I used to have to plead with people to give our graduates a chance."

The reason? "Today, the Spanish market cannot be ignored." Real-estate offices New York and New Jersey need Spanish-speaking personnel, he said. Requests also come from banks, insurance companies, publishers and unions.

Despite the demand for Spanish-speaking office workers, Mr. Schiffman said, there is still an anti-Hispanic bias. "People will say to me: 'Aren't you afraid to go to school? Aren't you afraid of being knifed?'"

He and Mr. Ferraro say they have created an old-fashioned learning environment, the kind they knew at "old New Utrecht High." They say that in the Spanish-American Institute's 25-year-history no student has ever abused a teacher and there has never been a single case of vandalism.

"It is very nice, this school," said Yolanda Guevara, who immigrated from Ecuador seven months ago and is studying to become a bilingual secretary.

"Yes, they teach you nice," added Gina Ambrossi, who arrived from Ecuador three years ago and has been a student of the institute for a year. "Sure I like it. That's why we're here. It is very good."