



BY **MELISSA LIMMER** PHOTOS BY **LAURISA LOPEZ**

ESPERANZA

(spanish for hope)

It's 5:30 p.m. and the halls of César Chávez Professional Development Middle School are empty except for a few stragglers waiting to be picked up from after-school activities and an occasional custodian doing the nightly cleaning. The once bustling hallways are humming with a quiet melody of

quest from Dr. Randy M. Wood, director of the center for Christian education and the associate director of the center for literacy in Baylor's School of Education. Working as the university liaison at César Chávez and teaching his own classes at the school, Wood saw a distinct need that was keeping

zoz Middle School, University Middle School and Waco High Professional Development School. Wood hopes that the program will grow to 600 participants by the end of this year.

While parents attend English classes, their children attend one of three programs.

In "Avance," licensed child-care providers watch babies, while in "LEAF kids" 4- to 6-year-old children work with elementary education students on primary lessons like colors and shapes. Students in first through sixth grades work on homework and get one-on-one tutoring.

Jessica Meehan, a Baylor graduate student and one of LEAF's chief volunteers, taught ESL and bilingual classes at Bell's Hill Elementary before going back to school. She joined LEAF because many of her previous students now attend César Chávez. "(LEAF) really gets the parents involved in school," she said. "They are feeling more confident and help their kids with their homework That's really big."

The location, classes and family-based program – everything – is intentional, right down to the name of the program.

"All education is about relationships," Wood said. "If you do that, people move forward."

While most ESL classes are 30 students to one teacher, LEAF classes are kept to small group sizes of three to four adult students per teacher to mirror the size of a small family.

Another relationship is growing:



broken English and Spanish drifting from the library and echoing through the tiled halls.

This melody is the song of hope, the song of an immigrant community struggling to find its way and survive in a new culture and country. This song is LEAF.

Every Thursday from 5:30 to 7 p.m., families from the middle school's surrounding neighborhood meet for English as a second language (ESL) classes called LEAF, or Learning English Among Friends.

LEAF first began as a simple re-

students from reaching their potential.

With the help of Principal Alfredo Loredó, Wood began a tutoring program for 25 struggling students after school to help them pass the state-mandated TAKS test. What began as a small labor of love has grown into a community-wide ESL program boasting 350 students and 100 volunteers.

Created in 2003, LEAF now has spread beyond César Chávez and the South Waco community. There are now six locations, including Carver Professional Development Middle School, Lake Air Middle School, Bra-

Baylor teachers are becoming the students and learning from the parents they teach English to. Freshman volunteer Candace Powell said she has learned a great deal about Hispanic culture, and talking with the students has helped her in her own Spanish class.

“Students lives are richer because of the families they have met,” Wood said. For many Baylor students this is the first time they’ve even met an immigrant or interacted with one on a personal level, he said. They get a direct, human experience with an issue they would have otherwise just heard on the news or read about.

Perhaps the most important relationship being built is between the LEAF program at César Chávez and the neighborhood it calls home. A sense of pride in the community is building here, and learning English is “the beginning of pride in the community,” Wood said.

Wood described the “goosebump” feeling the first day of LEAF when the middle school students walked hand in hand bringing their parents to school. The students want their parents to speak English, and they are proud of them for learning.

Families also take pride in their increased opportunities in the job market. Knowing English is a valued and marketable skill for these immigrants.

“To survive in our society, we need to speak English,” Wood said. But, he continued, “Being bilingual is not easy, or we’d all



be bilingual.”

Learning a foreign language is a daunting task. Many of the fathers who attend the program come straight to class after working eight to twelve-hour days.

Angel Olmos immigrated to the United States eight years ago. He has been attending LEAF classes for about three years, and often attends classes several times a week. He began attending after hearing about LEAF from neighbors and friends.

“My hands hurt from working hard,” he said, laying his callused hands against the cold plastic of the library table. For Olmos, learning English is a ticket out of his job as a welder.

Olmos described working on a job-site, and the foreman asking whether or not he knew how to speak English. When the answer is no, the boss points to you to heavy manual labor. If you speak English, though, you have the opportunity to do something different, he said.

Wood has high hopes that this growing pride and his relationships will translate into great changes for the South Waco community.

“I want LEAF to be the force that stops the cycle of poverty in south Waco,” he said. “Education is the answer.”

LEAF is also having an impact on Baylor’s campus. One hour a week, housekeepers and custodial staff take ESL classes taught by Baylor students. They’re paid by their employment contractor for the hour spent in class and Student Government pays for half of the cost of books.

LEAF is a shining example of the impact a university with wide and diverse resources can have on the less fortunate community it calls home. According to Wood, LEAF has mobilized one of the largest groups of Baylor students working in the community, with all 100 volunteers coming from the campus.

In the many immigrant neighborhoods of Waco, where people live teetering along the line of “just making it” and the harsh consequences of “just not,” they are starting to see hope springing from the hard work.

The melody of English and Spanish that weaves its way down the halls of César Chávez elementary is making its way out the doors and down the streets.

And the song is sweet, for it is one of “esperanza,” which, the students now know, means “hope.” •

