

# Plano nonprofit helps immigrant families break language barriers, gain employment

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Lux Ice Andres Tovar (left), smiles towards his coworker Carlos Castillo while packing drinking ice inside the facility on Tuesday, Sept. 26, 2023, in Flower Mound. Tovar and his wife, Marlene, and their children Rafael, 14, and Andrea, 18, made the decision to come to the U.S. in October 2019 due to the political and economic situation in Venezuela. (Shafkat Anowar / Staff Photographer)

Mileidis Mendoza graduated with a degree in business, then got her master's in accounting and ran her own business for two years until Venezuela's political and economic instability forced her family to leave.

Mendoza, after her family of four arrived in the U.S. in September 2019, worked 12-hour days, six days a week in a clothing warehouse and lived with her sister-in-law's family. Eleven people squeezed into the two-bedroom apartment for six months.

Andres Tovar, like Mendoza before immigrating to the U.S., was working in a high-level job as a systems engineer specializing in executive sales with 3M products. Tovar, with his two kids and wife, Marlene, who had also worked as a systems engineer, arrived from Venezuela in October 2019. The family squeezed into a one-bed, one-bath apartment for a year while Tovar worked in maintenance at a school and Marlene worked in a warehouse.

Struggling to pay bills with low-paying jobs, especially amid the pandemic, both Tovar and Mendoza found themselves standing in line for food at The Storehouse's food pantry, Seven Loaves, which serves about 5,000 families each month.

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“People comment constantly about the [food] line, but that line is not the end of the story,” said Candace Winslow, chief executive officer of The Storehouse of Collin County. “It’s just the beginning for some.”

The Storehouse's Seven Loaves Food Pantry serves about 5,000 families each month. Through all four of its programs, the nonprofit served 149,064 unduplicated individuals in FY23. (Courtesy of The Storehouse of Co / (Courtesy of The Storehouse)

Founded in 2009 and based in Plano, [The Storehouse](#) serves a highly educated, immigrant population, where more than 50% of those who participate in the nonprofit's English as a Second Language (ESL) classes have a bachelor's degree or higher. They are engineers, doctors and business-people, who face challenges finding a job after immigrating to the U.S., as language barriers place many job opportunities out of reach.

As of 2018, 32% of all immigrant adults had a bachelor's degree or higher, similar to the 33% rate among U.S.-born adults, however, in that same year, about 23.4% of college-educated immigrants in the U.S. labor market were either unemployed or working in low-skilled jobs including as dishwashers, security guards or taxi drivers often because of difficulty getting their credentials recognized or other hurdles, according to the [Migration Policy Institute](#).

Further, while the median household income of college-educated immigrants was roughly similar to that for their U.S.-born counterparts, college-educated immigrants were somewhat more likely to be in poverty compared to U.S. born college-educated adults — at 7% versus 4%, respectively — due to a combination of factors including larger family sizes, a higher level of underemployment and a higher likelihood of working part-time.

The Storehouse recognized this disparity — highly educated individuals working in low-paying jobs because of a language barrier — and through an educational and job partnership program, is working to help such individuals obtain living-wage jobs with full benefits, providing them with the stability and support they need to ultimately transition back into the careers they previously had in their home countries.

“I never thought I would be able to do the same thing here that I was doing in Venezuela,” said Mendoza after becoming a part of The Storehouse’s educational and job partnership programs.

## Program helps grow job, language skills

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First, The Storehouse — where 70% of those served across Collin, Dallas and Denton counties are Hispanic/ Latinx — worked to launch The Academy, an educational program offering classes in language, job and life skills. Storehouse volunteers teach ESL classes, and The Academy also offers classes in blood pressure management, diabetes management, understanding credit and how to navigate enrollment at Plano ISD.

Mendoza and Tovar enrolled in The Academy when classes started last summer in the pilot program along with 38 other clients, whom The Storehouse calls “neighbors.” Over 400 people tried to sign up in the first hour of registration, and there’s always a waiting list. The demand for such classes was proof of the need and desire for such support, especially in learning English as a second language, Winslow said. The classes have expanded since the pilot program launched, and today Mendoza and Tovar are students alongside 167 other English-language learners.

Volunteers help individuals during English as a Second Language (ESL) classes through The Academy (Courtesy of The Storehouse of Collin County). (Courtesy of The Storehouse of Co / Courtesy of The Storehouse)

The creation of a job partnership program followed, giving individuals the opportunity to earn a living wage while continuing to build those language skills.

While those who want to participate in the job partnership program do not have to be a part of The Academy, trust — which is key to helping those who participate in the program succeed — is often built by getting to know the individuals during class, Winslow said.

“The reason the job partnership works so well is because our neighbors trust The Storehouse. They know us,” Winslow said. “We are looking for job employment opportunities that we know will be good for our neighbors. We look for partners that understand how we do our work and the why behind it.”

Lux Ice Andres Tovar (left), his coworkers Carlos Castillo (center) and Lizmar Rojas pack drinking ice inside the facility on Tuesday, Sept. 26, 2023, in Flower Mound. Tovar and his wife, Marlene, and their children Rafael, 14, and Andrea, 18, made the decision to come to the U.S. in October 2019 due to the political and economic situation in Venezuela. (Shafkat Anowar / Staff Photographer)

Lux Ice is The Storehouse’s first job partner where 25 Storehouse neighbors, including Tovar and Mendoza, have been employed since the spring, and five have already been promoted. The Storehouse is in conversation with four other employers and is working to place 100 individuals with job partners by the end of June 2024.

Tovar said the community he has found at work makes him feel supported in reaching his goals to become better at speaking English and eventually working in a job similar to what he did in Venezuela. And, soon, Tovar and his wife, Marlene, are opening their own business, Cachitos Bakery.

Mendoza, who started working at Lux Ice in May, was promoted in July to accounts payable specialist, a similar job to what she did as an accountant in Venezuela. In her new role, she said she was worried about the language barrier, but she reads *The New York Times* everyday to improve her English.

Lux Ice accounts payable specialist Mileidis Mendoza works on her computer on Tuesday, Sept. 26, 2023, at the office in Flower Mound. She used to work in Venezuela in accounting. After starting her career at Lux she was quickly promoted to accounts payable specialist. (Shafkat Anowar / Staff Photographer)

“I started understanding one word, two words, three words,” Mendoza said. “I have a goal, and I’m going for it. My short-term goal is to be better at listening. My long-term goal is for December 2024 to be speaking, listening and writing in English.”

A gold star sits in the corner of her desk at Lux Ice. It’s a reminder: “That’s what I’m going to be,” she said.

## **Rooted in trust, holistic support**

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Collaboration, trust and wrap-around support are key to the program, as Lux Ice leaders work alongside The Storehouse, helping neighbors learn English and excel on the job: On Tuesday’s everyone practices speaking Spanish, and on Friday’s everyone tries to speak English-only. In the breakroom, sometimes a movie will play in English with Spanish subtitles. Additionally, The Storehouse conducts English training once a month at Lux Ice focusing on conversational items and terms used on the production floor.

Beyond intentional, on-the-job language practice, each neighbor has a Storehouse mentor to walk alongside them for up to a year, following a seven-step methodology coined the “Work Well Methodology.”

Andres Tovar walks the stage at The Academy's spring 2023 graduation (Courtesy of The Storehouse of Collin County). (Courtesy of The Storehouse of Co / Courtesy of The Storehouse)

The methodology can apply to any job partner and is a way to ensure that wrap-around support is met after neighbors are placed with employers, Winslow said. Once a job and individual from The Storehouse who might fit the job is identified, a Storehouse employee talks with the individual to gauge their interest.

[How a North Texas nonprofit addresses homelessness holistically](#)

“Before we ever introduce the neighbor to the employer, we lean into that trust and ask if they’re interested in learning about the opportunity,” Winslow said.

If they decide to apply, the employer conducts interviews and decides whether or not they want to hire the individual. If hired, the individual is then matched with a Storehouse Career Coach to help address any issues, questions or challenges. Extra support is provided for neighbors through monthly training sessions on soft skills needed to be successful in the workplace.

Even with targeted support, The Storehouse faces challenges of time and space, as there is more demand for the program, especially at The Academy, than there is supply. To help address these constraints, The Storehouse offers on-demand ESL classes through Rosetta Stone, so learners can practice outside of the classroom.

#### Recovery high school provides ‘accountability, safe space’ amid rising drug use

Eventually, The Storehouse plans to build its own employment opportunities through operating its own social enterprise.

“The reason we feel like that’s advantageous is because we can really control the pace of that,” Winslow said. “We can continue to be in deep relationship with our neighbor, and with the social enterprise, much like our job partners, we don’t want our neighbor to stay in that social enterprise forever. We want them to be in there for a defined period of time, building their skills with the ultimate goal of placing them out in the marketplace for the best opportunity possible for them.”



Haeven Gibbons, Staff, Reporter. Haeven Gibbons covers Collin County with emphasis on McKinney. She formerly worked as a summer intern with the Dallas Morning News Education Lab before receiving her Bachelor of Arts in Journalism with a minor in Spanish from Texas Christian University in December. She previously interned for the Fort Worth Star-Telegram and AM New York.

✉ [haeven.gibbons@dallasnews.com](mailto:haeven.gibbons@dallasnews.com)     [haevengibbons](https://twitter.com/haevengibbons)