



Tomlinson Adult Learning Center is an inviting, affordable community resource for adults of all backgrounds and financial positions.

Building Inclusive Community at Tomlinson Adult Learning Center

By Marilyn Malara

The moment you walk through the doors of Tomlinson Adult Learning Center, overlooking lovely Mirror Lake Park in St. Petersburg, a sense of wholesome ambition arises. You become motivated to grow, learn, and adapt to the changing world around you. Often for those who attend the center for GED, English for Speakers of Other Languages, or vocational computer classes, that ambition is paramount.

The long-established Tomlinson Adult Learning Center is an inviting, affordable community resource for adults of all backgrounds and financial positions. For just \$30 per trimester, students can gain computer skills for new jobs, learn English, or study for their GEDs. Thanks to financing from the Pinellas County Schools, the center has provided support for adults seeking to further their educations for more than 30 years. Tomlinson also offers literacy and citizenship classes and is a great place for volunteers.

Supporting Refugees and Immigrants

With a mix of locals and students from all over the world -- including immigrants, refugees, and tourists -- Tomlinson is an international hub. Many of the center's 680 currently enrolled students come from countries such as Brazil, Costa Rica, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Ukraine, Venezuela, and Iraq.

"Our program is a great opportunity for people to learn English in a variety of ways," ESOL teacher Tanja Vurunic says. The goal of the program, she says, is for students to become self-sufficient in American society through English-language education.

Most ESOL courses at Tomlinson are "open entry" meaning that students are free to enroll at any time during a term. The school offers daytime and nighttime classes. For those unable to attend in person, online classes are available. The programs are also "open exit," meaning students may cease their schooling at any time without penalties.

Refugees in need of assistance in English and other areas also find solace within Tomlinson's historic, sunlit hallways. The school takes the initiative to help displaced individuals and families transition into life in the United States. With the aid of community partners, monthly workshops, and a team of mentors, refugees find comfort and resources to help rebuild after traumatic or life-altering events.

Passionate Career Counseling

In addition to complete GED and ESOL curriculums, Tomlinson also provides top-notch career support. Dr. Barbara Riddle-Dvorak is the school's career counseling guru. She assists both GED and ESOL students in the often-confusing process of searching for work.

"Ninety-eight percent of what I do is help people believe in





At Tomlinson, students are able to build their resumes, research careers, and discover educational pathways. Photos by Marilyn Malara

themselves," Riddle-Dvorak says. The passionate career counselor is always looking for new resources for Tomlinson students, especially those from other countries. A whole-hearted believer in the power of diversity, she adds that those who enter the United States from other countries "all want to work. They all want to learn English. They don't want anything handed to them."

Riddle-Dvorak teaches students how to navigate an online portal that helps build their résumés, research careers, and discover educational pathways. She encourages graduates to take next steps by providing information on further education, scholarships, and internship opportunities such as YearUp (yearup.org).

A Powerhouse Team

From administrators and teachers to volunteers, the Tomlinson team actively supports its diverse community through instruction and building relationships.

"The people who come to this country [now] are just like the people who have come to this country," administrator and former high school teacher Patrick Jennings says.

Helen Brown-Keys, who teaches computer skills, works mostly with students hoping to build their digital literacy or earn Microsoft Office certifications. Her warm personality instantly brings a sense of ease to her tech-filled classroom. She invites anyone interested in learning how to better work a computer to visit her lab and watch a class "just to see what's it's like."

A Life-Changing Volunteer Opportunity

Tomlinson Adult Learning Center is the perfect place for community service. The center warmly welcomes volunteers for support throughout the year. After the initial application process, background check, and brief training, volunteers are either assigned tutees or placed in classrooms to assist teachers.

Currently, the center needs volunteers to help tutor ESOL students who cannot read or write in their native languages. The center's literacy classes are a life-changing, dignifying resource. One-on-one volunteers add value to these classes, since students often achieve at different levels. General ESOL and GED volunteers also are accepted during each term.

To volunteer at Tomlinson Adult Learning Center, contact Nina Cornelius by phone at (727) 893-2723 or e-mail Corneliusn@pcsb.org. To enroll or seek further information about Tomlinson, visit pcsb.org/tomlinson, call (727) 893-2723, or e-mail Tomlinsonadult@gmail.com

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