

IT MELTING POT

Washington, D.C., school teaches tech to America's newest arrivals



BY CALVIN HARPER

Calvin Harper is an associate editor of *Certification Magazine*, and a veteran of the publishing industry.

Since 1776, tens of millions have immigrated to the United States for the chance to start a new life. They come for a variety of reasons: some to practice their religion; some to escape war, persecution or poverty; and still others looking for an opportunity to own land or start their own businesses. In short, they come for freedom — the freedom to be who and what they want to be.

It's never been easy being an immigrant, particularly if you speak a

foreign language, have limited education, and espouse different customs and beliefs. Still, it is a testament to their desires that these newcomers worked hard to learn the ways of their new home, care for their families and, along the way, became contributing citizens.

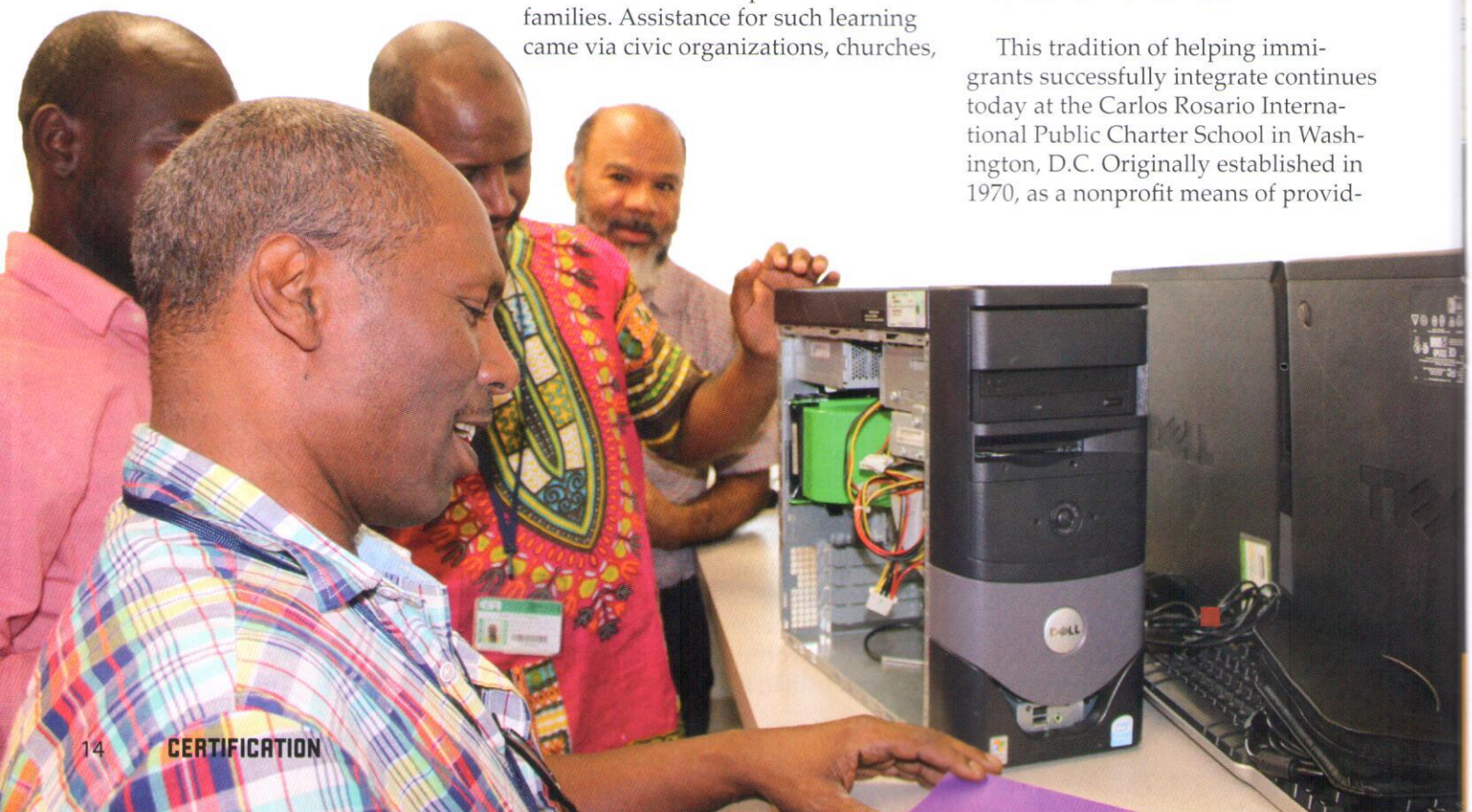
Over the centuries, many have seemed to know instinctively that education was the path to success in America. They pursued schooling to learn English and to develop skills that enabled them to provide for their families. Assistance for such learning came via civic organizations, churches,

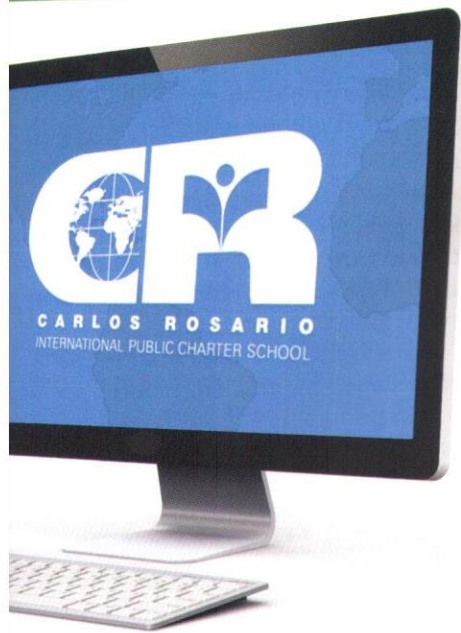
local schools, and private individuals, and the efforts of those good people have had a large and lasting impact.

Along the way the vast majority of immigrants became citizens, embraced the American Dream and played an important role in creating our national identity. They've fought in our wars, built our infrastructure and created thousands of businesses, helping to make us the most prosperous and powerful nation in the world.

A school for newcomers

This tradition of helping immigrants successfully integrate continues today at the Carlos Rosario International Public Charter School in Washington, D.C. Originally established in 1970, as a nonprofit means of provid-





ing English instruction and resources to Latino immigrants, the school would eventually open its doors to immigrants from all nations, and go on to become the first adult charter school in the United States

Over time the School's mission has expanded to offer an educational experience designed to help Washington, D.C.'s adult-immigrant population become "invested, productive citizens, and members of American Society who give back to their family and community."

For 46 years, Carlos Rosario has been accomplishing its mission by focusing on excellence in teaching and learning, and by establishing community partnerships to foster a safe and compassionate learning environment. They have been astoundingly successful, investing in and supporting the American journey of more than 60,000 immigrants.

Serving more than 2,900 students annually — 91 percent of whom are below the poverty line — Carlos Rosario provides foundational literacy and skills courses that provide the basic building blocks for career development and advancement. Classes include practical, context-based learning that prepares students for everyday life in the U.S.

The curriculum encompasses: soft skills, health and wellness, consumer education, parenting and family skills, math and technology concepts, digital

literacy, the rights and responsibilities of citizens, cultural awareness and appreciation, and participation in the democratic process.

Carlos Rosario's education model combines adult education with life skills programs and support services. Since most of the students are recent immigrants, instruction in English as a second language is crucial and a part of all training classes.

Teaching key skills

The school offers career training in three different academies dealing with high-growth, high-demand fields: Culinary Arts, Health, and Information Technology (IT). Academy courses cover more than just classroom instruction. They are supplemented with hands-on field opportunities that give students valuable on-the-job experience.

Graduates of these three academies earn industry standard certifications that enable them to enter "family-sustaining" careers and progress to higher levels of responsibility in their respective fields.

Because so many of the students have work and family commitments, Carlos Rosario offers three sessions per day, morning, afternoon and evening, with each session running approximately three hours. Students have the convenience to enroll in

classes that fit their schedules.

Of course, no education today is complete without training in IT skills. In 2013 the school opened its Sonia Gutierrez Campus to focus specifically on workforce development. The campus is named after Sonia Gutierrez, the founder and president emeritus of Carlos Rosario.

All students who attend the school learn the basics of computer technology. Technology is integrated throughout the curriculum and students spend class time in the computer labs weekly, where they focus on learning beginning computer skills such as e-mail, navigating the Internet and the basic features of Microsoft Office.

There is also a Microsoft Office Applications class where students can gain more advanced skills in Word, PowerPoint and Excel — skills that enhance their ability to succeed in the workforce.

Getting down to the IT nuts and bolts

The real meat and potatoes of the IT program, however, is the Technology Academy, where courses are designed to provide students with the knowledge and skills to earn IT certifications. Students receive more than 400 hours of instruction.

“Serving more than 2,900 students annually — 91 percent of whom are below the poverty line — Carlos Rosario provides foundational literacy and skills courses that provide the basic building blocks for career development and advancement.”

Among other skills, they learn to install, configure, and troubleshoot hardware and software in physical and virtual environments; optimize system performance; and manage and maintain Windows Client and Server Operating Systems. They also learn how to configure mobile devices like smart phones and tablets, and manage resources in the cloud.

The school also recently redesigned the Technology Academy programs, to include a course for students to earn CompTIA's IT Fundamentals certification. This course is designed to help students learn more about the world of IT, explore a potential career in the field, and demonstrate to prospective employers that they have the basic skills to enter the IT workforce. It's also a handy stepping stone to more advanced certifications like CompTIA's A+, Network+ and Security+.

Many students, though certainly not all, come to the IT Academy with prior IT experience. Some even have IT degrees from their home countries. The program averages 30 students per year and, in a typical class, 20 percent of the students already possess IT-related degrees from their home countries. Last year was a surprising anomaly, with one-half of the 2015 students already holding foreign IT degrees.

Completion of the IT curriculum takes 10 months — a bit longer than in other schools, because of the need to help students develop proficiency in English, the language of IT, as well as the colloquialisms of the U.S. workplace.

A staff that understands

The biggest challenge for students in the IT program, according to Aracelly Watts, Assistant Principal and Director of the Technology Academy, is that they “come from many different countries and face language barriers.”

To combat this challenge, Carlos Rosario focuses on workplace vocabulary and employability skills to help students learn workplace expectations of U.S. employers. Additionally, students are taught the importance of and differences between certifications and degreed education.

Watts herself is from Panama and understands the challenges faced by immigrants. While studying in Panama, she received a scholarship to Maryville University in St. Louis, Mo., where she completed a bachelor's degree in management, as well as an MBA.

“I know how difficult it can be to leave your home and all the people you know to come here,” she said. “But the school does provide a supportive environment for the students so that they can accomplish their goals.”

The IT staff is made up of dedicated instructors with strong backgrounds and certifications in IT. They also have experience teaching English to non-English speakers. For the instructors, teaching at Carlos Rosario is more a calling than a job. Their commitment to the students is real.

Eddy Ceballos has more than 20 years of experience as an educator and loves teaching. He has been teaching full-time at Carlos Rosario for eight years. Prior to joining the faculty, he worked as a network administrator and occasionally substituted for the school's technology classes.

“There is nothing more rewarding than being instrumental in changing students' lives through quality education,” said Ceballos. “Carlos Rosario has accorded me the opportunity to serve immigrants who want to pursue a career in technology.

“It's exciting to see students starting school with very little knowledge in technology and ending up getting technical certifications and good-paying jobs in the field.”

Workplace readiness and devotion

The IT students work closely with their instructors in the classroom, and



with community partners as interns. Students are placed with private and public entities, many of them nonprofits, as a way to gain some real-world hands-on exposure to IT issues and challenges.

"Because nonprofits often do not have the budget to hire an outside technician to solve IT problems our students provide the technical support needed," said Watts.

Working as interns also helps students make important industry connections that often lead to full-time employment. CompTIA IT Fundamentals and CompTIA A+ certifications coupled with valuable internship experience gives students a strong foundation to gainful employment.

In 2014, 50 percent of certified students found jobs in IT or decided to pursue advanced studies in computer-related fields. This percentage increased to 71 percent for 2015. To help those wishing to pursue higher education in IT-related degrees, Carlos Rosario awards scholarships to several students each year.

Watts speaks of a difference she has noticed between IT professionals who graduate from college with an IT degree and Carlos Rosario alum. She calls it the "immigrant loyalty" factor, explaining that Carlos Rosario's students show a tenacious loyalty to their first employers.

"I can only speak for the immigrants I know," she said. "They are thirsty for a chance to prove themselves, and incredibly loyal to whoever gives them that opportunity. To me, typical IT graduates seem to always be looking for their next job or opportunity. Our students feel a sense of loyalty to their employers and often stick with them for years."

Prepared for long-term success — and citizenship

Carlos Rosario trains its students to become dependable workers who are capable of supporting themselves and their families, as well as being productive members of the community. As part of this process the school encour



Giving back is a fundamental part of the school's mission and they work hard to foster a sense of community pride in their students. ... In 2015, more than 3,000 hours of volunteer time were donated by students and faculty.

ages becoming an American citizen.

There is a citizenship preparation class that prepares the students to pass the official naturalization test. It covers U.S. history, government, the Constitution, the democratic process, and the rights and responsibilities of citizens.

"There is value in being a U.S. citizen," said Watts. "We want students to become the type of citizens that are involved in their communities. We want as many eligible immigrants as possible to become citizens. And those who aren't eligible, we want to become eligible."

To help students learn the political process, the school this year kicked off a voter campaign complete with a web page containing instructions on registering to vote, explanations of the U.S. political process and parties, links to actual practice ballots, a list of important voting dates to remember, and even a brief questionnaire to help you students decide which party they most identify with.

Giving back is a fundamental part of the School's mission and they work hard to foster a sense of community pride in their students. They have a robust volunteer program that enables students, staff and alumni to join with community members to help meet local needs. In 2015, more than 3,000 hours of volunteer time were donated by students and faculty. Some of the volunteer activities included a Christmas toy drive, tutoring in schools, and a local soup kitchen.

An ongoing endeavor

Carlos Rosario's mission is helping immigrants chase the American Dream. And for 46 years they have

helped tens of thousands of adults obtain high school diplomas, become citizens, and develop the English skills necessary to support their children, earn college degrees and workforce certifications, and enter into stable and profitable careers.

Last year alone, 330 graduates completed career training programs, learned English, earned IT certifications, passed their GED exams, and became new citizens.

The United States is a unique country filled with amazing people and we've accomplished a great deal. The irony is that we're not a nation of aristocrats — we're not a color or a class. We're a collective act of faith. A faith that believes the sky is the limit. A faith that leads us to cheer for and extend a helping hand to the underdog.

We don't care where you come from, or who your ancestors were. We ask only that you do as so many immigrants before have done and join us in building this country. The U.S. is the most multi-ethnic society on Earth, and the work Carlos Rosario is doing is a great example. The school embraces newcomers, helps them feel comfortable and offers support and encouragement as they chase their dreams.

Perhaps this desire to help others is best expressed by Ceballos, as he tells how he came to join the faculty: "One day I received a call from the technology coordinator offering me a full time position as IT Instructor. My love and passion for supporting the immigrant community were part of the reasons why I made the decision to transition to Carlos Rosario.

"I have no regrets with this decision." ■