

## NEWS

# Cassidy: Google tutors and Silicon Valley janitors build language and relationships

By **MIKE CASSIDY** | Bay Area News Group

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The big brains of technology go to companies like [Google \(GOOG\)](#) to change the world.

But sometimes it can be every bit as gratifying to help someone you see every day make a change for the better in his or her life. Like the way Yeni Lopez, a janitor who's been cleaning the Googleplex for seven years, can now help her five-year-old daughter with school work because Lopez speaks English better than she ever has before.

"I want to be able to talk to everybody," says Lopez, a 30-year-old immigrant from El Salvador. "Wherever I go, I want to be able to speak English."

Lopez has had some help with English in recent years, including from a one-on-one tutoring program that grew out of the collective interests of the janitors' union, the janitors' employers and the Silicon Valley companies that inhabit the



For a year and a half, Lopez has met in a conference room for an hour a week for English lessons with Ben Lindahl, 29, a Google software engineer. Yes, the tutoring sessions started with structured instruction and as a way for Lindahl to make good on New Year's resolutions to volunteer more and to brush up on his Spanish.

But that's nothing compared to all that they have grown into.

Lindahl, who lives in Mountain View, has helped Lopez with the vocabulary she needs to talk to her doctor. He has helped her with the conversations that come up at her daughter's San Jose school. Lopez's confidence has grown. She no longer avoids making eye contact with Google workers, afraid they might approach her with a request in English that she doesn't understand. Now when a stranger on Google's sprawling campus asks her for directions, she gives them.

And Lopez, who works all night then naps before volunteering at her daughter's school, has taught Lindahl plenty.

"I have learned how difficult it can be to not be able to communicate with the world around you," Lindahl says, "especially if your daughter is living in that world."

So much sets us apart from one another in Silicon Valley. It is a land of the haves, the have mores and the have nots, often separated by a freeway or a few city blocks or the jobs we do or places we work. We speak different languages; come from different ethnic backgrounds; make wildly different incomes. But our lives intersect every day.

The tutoring and learning that goes on at Google is an opportunity to make something of those intersections.

"It's easy to stay in this Google bubble," says Andrew Howell, a Google project manager who's been tutoring janitor Martin Santillan since early 2011. "Or you can really get to understand your neighbor and build a holistic community."

No, building holistic communities wasn't the stated goal when the program was launched. In fact, the tutoring grew out of a much broader initiative that resulted from labor contracts that established training funds for union janitors in California. The Service Employees International Union-United Service Workers West and janitorial contractors, with the help of grants and donations, formed

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The idea was to better prepare janitors to work with those who work in the buildings they clean and to position themselves to move up the career ladder or move on to better careers. The volunteer tutoring, which is currently in place at Google, Stanford University and UC-Berkeley, was started to enhance the more formal English classes.

Google's program, which currently has about 35 tutor and student pairs, launched nearly two years ago, says Patrick Nielsen, a Google operations and planning director, who's already declared the program an unmitigated success.

When people speak the same language they are more likely to talk to each other. Tutors, Nielsen says, have introduced janitors to co-workers who are not tutors.

"What we want to do is get people in a position where they feel like they're valued," he says. "It builds relationships, a trusted friendship in some cases."

As is often the case with the big brains in technology at Google, those in the tutoring program have much grander plans. Lindahl says the company has set aside 15 laptops to lend to janitors working on computer skills. Volunteers have started a modest library to use in the tutoring program. And Lindahl wants to produce videos to guide tutors who might want to start similar efforts at other companies.

"We have sort of a big vision for this program," Lindahl says.

And now that he mentions it, maybe the real way to change the world is one or two lives at a time.

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