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BUENOS DÍAS, MUCHACHOS!

CAPTAINS TAKE SPANISH INTO THE COMMUNITY.

by [Kelli Caplan](#) | September 26, 2024

Read time: about 3 min

As Christopher Newport students begin reading stories aloud, the toddlers in the audience at Main Street Library in Newport News grow wide-eyed and their faces fill with puzzled looks.

The stories they're hearing sound a bit different. That's because the Captains are reading them in Spanish, adding an international, bilingual twist to today's storytime.

Very quickly, the children catch on, mimicking what they are hearing and soaking in the new language, smiling the whole time.

Bringing español to the youngsters is part of the charge for CNU's [Spanish in the Community \(SPAN 330\)](#) class. Enhancing the story hour with Spanish books and conversation helps both the toddlers and the students.

"Storytime is a long-standing tradition in Newport News. However, a Spanish language storytime has not always been provided. With storytime, CNU students provide an important service to the community while sharing their love of language," said Dr. Kevin Anzzolin, Lecturer of [Spanish](#).

The idea is to expose the children to a different culture and language in hopes of igniting an early interest in Spanish. It also provides an ideal arena in which Christopher Newport students can perfect their Spanish by taking



it out of the classroom and into the community.

On this particular day, enthusiastic Captains are special guests at a storytime focused on celebrating Hispanic Heritage Month (Sept. 15 - Oct. 15) as well as Mexican and Central American independence days (Sept. 16th). Storytime offers the students an opportunity to not only practice their Spanish in a real world setting, but also to pass on their passion for the language to the next generation of learners.

“We think this is very important, especially for the younger generation, to know two languages,” said Jason Lowden, ‘26 [Accounting](#). “We were excited to come here to do this.”

Anna Strode ‘26 [Political Science](#) and [American Studies](#), has been learning Spanish since middle school. Sharing her enthusiasm for the language with youngsters brings her Spanish journey full circle.

“This goes with my love of learning and helping people,” she said. “I get to practice and they get to learn something. I love working with kids, so this is so fun for me.”

The library experience spotlighted the purpose of the Spanish in the Community class, which was designed as a place where learning a language intersects with the idea of using it to break down cultural and communication barriers and establish productive relationships in Newport News.

The class requires students to complete 15 hours of volunteer work in the community. Currently, CNU students assist World Language teachers in Newport News Public Schools (NNPS) and also tutor in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes and Spanish General Education Diploma (GED) courses at an adult learning center in the community, said Dr. Sarah Finley, Associate Professor of Spanish, who is teaching Spanish in the Community this semester.

“I hope that the students broaden their ideas about the Spanish-speaking world and realize that there is plenty of Spanish spoken here, right outside their front doors,” Finley said. “To this end, I hope that they will become good interlocutors with the Latino/Hispanic community here in Hampton Roads and will also become ambassadors of language learning, with firsthand experience about the power of language to bridge cultural divides.”

Anzzolin, who helps organize the community spaces where students practice their Spanish, has seen just how impactful the experience has been, and how it has shaped worldviews and career trajectories.

“The Spanish in the Community course offers students a unique opportunity to experience the rich cultural and linguistic heritage we enjoy right here in Newport News,” he said. “It provides students with a sense of belonging in Hampton Roads and deepens our cultural awareness—particularly in regards to Spanish-speaking, primarily Latino communities. Beyond textbook Spanish, students get to see how Spanish is being used, taught and lived around the area. Language learning is a springboard in order to promote cultural awareness in the United States.”

Spanish is the second most spoken language in the United States. More than 43.4 million people aged five or older speak Spanish at home (13.7%). Spanish is also the most learned language other than English, with about eight million students. In Hampton Roads, approximately 7 percent of the population identifies as Hispanic/Latino.

“Hampton Roads is home to a significant number of Spanish speakers. Classrooms are great places to begin language learning, but being part of the community gives us a sense of belonging,” Anzzolin said. Speaking Spanish in off-campus venues is critical for students to advance their understanding of the culture and to continue improving their Spanish fluency, Finley and Anzzolin said.

“Being out in the community, helping others in another language, meeting with different backgrounds is challenging but rewarding work,” Anzzolin said. “There is no better way to learn a language than by experiencing it firsthand. Education environments—the GED class, NNPS, etc.—provide students with a meaningful but supportive environment to develop their language skills.”