

## New English Classes for Co-op Owners: Crisis becomes opportunity to change life stories

Liliana Avendaño is learning grammar and vocabulary to talk about a solidarity economy and goals of her childcare co-op – Resplendor. Some classmates are learning English accounting terms for their cleaning cooperative. All class participants either own or are in the process of launching workers-owned cooperatives in East Boston; they meet Monday and Friday evenings over Zoom.

The English class is part of BICA (Boston Immigrant Cooperative Alliance), a new partnership among ENB, the Center for Cooperative Development and Solidarity (CCDS), the Mayor’s Office for Immigrant Advancement, and East Boston Harborside Community School, funded by Massachusetts General’s Hospital through Determination of Need (DoN) process. BICA will enable residents to strengthen English skills and fully participate in the solidarity economy CCDS is building in East Boston, where the city’s highest share of Latinx residents reside.

Under the leadership of Lili and CCDS General Coordinator Luz Zambrano, CCDS, now with 300 member families, has since 2016 been building a cooperative economy through education, organizing and business development. The work grew exponentially during the pandemic. Lili said: “Together, we can turn the crisis into an opportunity. We were all called upon to reinvent ourselves.”



Lili is living proof. Seven years ago, she and her teenage daughter, immigrated from Medellin, Colombia, escaping domestic violence. With limited English, she worked as a nanny but her employer required her to do things she wasn’t hired to do. She began attending meetings about forming co-ops in East Boston. As for many other Latin Americans living in the U.S., it felt natural.

***“Cooperative culture is part of my life. It was beautiful because in Colombia I studied in a cooperative high school and university. I knew the effect that developing a cooperative alternative has on our communities.”***

Lili never looked back. ***“I was a caterpillar, now I am a butterfly.”*** Today, Lili is Education and Community Outreach Coordinator for CCDS. The Resplendor co-op offers bilingual education based on cooperative values to children under five. In June 2020, she earned her Early Childhood Education degree from Urban College; other Resplendor members are following suit.

Some 60 CCDS members either own or are in the process of launching workers-owned cooperatives, some formed out of dire necessity during the pandemic, as residents were left without work or a safety net. Puntada Cooperative began sewing masks; Sazón Internacional Cooperative is feeding families; others include Eplam Cooperative, a cooperative consulting group; Renacer Cooperative for eldercare, Green Clean, a cleaning Cooperative, and Tabor Kids a recreational Cooperative for children, youth, and families.



CCDS' work during the pandemic has been transformational. ***"People learned they will be ok,"*** said Lili. ***"We got some funds to help them with rent right now, but that will end. But by joining the cooperative movement, this crisis becomes an opportunity to change the story of their lives."***

As part of ENB's economic recovery strategies, BICA classes are based on ENB's English for Immigrant Entrepreneurs Curriculum, covering business planning, budgeting, marketing, customer service and safety. Harborside Community School is working with ENB to customize and deliver the course – students discuss "cooperative" earnings rather than "business" earnings. Each student receives a Chromebook and stipend. The City's Immigrant Advancement office is working to expand opportunities for immigrant-led cooperatives. BICA also spawned another low-level English for Entrepreneurs course through a related East Boston Resiliency Project, under the State's Urban Agenda Program, to help co-ops get products and services to market. In total, 53 co-op members are now enrolled in English classes.

Lili is gaining confidence and starting to participate in meetings in English. ***"I never imagined I would be in meetings with people from the City, and others. For all of us, it's a necessity to be able to talk about our work with people from outside, with those that have resources that can make our work a reality."***

Learning English ***"...allows us all to participate and break barriers of fear and shame that stops us from speaking up,"*** said Lili. ***"We are reminded that we know a lot more than we thought."*** Students also are learning Google Classroom, Zoom, and other platforms to communicate with others in the cooperatives.

***"I'm doing this step by step, with so much love, because I know that it is creating the change we all want for our community."***

\*\*\*\*\*