Press Release

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Fort Drum Public Affairs

English as a Second Language class at Fort Drum empowers community members to connect, communicate and build confidence

FORT DRUM, N.Y. -- A group of community members were recently sitting together in the lounge area at the Fort Drum Family Resource Center, enjoying each other’s company with the ease of longtime friends.

When the clock struck 11 a.m., they moved to the nearby classroom to begin the day’s instruction – bringing with them the same enthusiasm and fellowship they shared moments before.

Welcome to the English as a Second Language class.

“They have really become close with one another and happy to be doing this together,” said Paige Konoza, instructor. “It’s not just about learning English. They spend time outside of class and look out for one another.”

Konoza said that, for them, language is not a barrier but an opportunity.

“These classes offer spouses – and we have some service members too – a chance to really connect with other people and build a network of support,” she said. “They are there for each other if someone needs a car ride or when their Soldier is on deployment and needs help.”

Konoza has been teaching ESL at Fort Drum since her family moved here in the fall of 2019, first as a volunteer and then as a part-time instructor through Literacy of Northern New York. She previously taught ESL in middle school while stationed in Texas, where she also volunteered to teach recently arrived immigrants.

But she also experienced the opposite side of the classroom when she was a language student in Germany.

“Everyone was thoughtful and considerate of one another,” she recalled. “We were rooting each other on, just wanting each other to do well.”

One of her students, Florence, registered for ESL at Fort Drum while preparing to take her citizenship test, which includes an oral interview.

“When she did pass that, we were all really proud of her,” Konoza said. “I think students are not just learning grammar and vocabulary, but the confidence you need to speak a second language. She was really proud of herself for showing what she could do.”

Konoza recalled another student, Jenny, who came to class with her little boy.

“Then she had a baby who also came to class with her, but she kept coming to each class,” she said. “Now she is working full-time, and not just a job but the start of a career. She is really reaching a major professional goal.”

Scarlett Sharkey, Fort Drum Relocation Readiness Program manager, said volunteers are instrumental to the ESL class, and that community members can find it a rewarding experience.

“We love our volunteers and they help us so much,” she said. “When some students need a little more one-on-one time, this is when a volunteer can provide that extra attention. There is no experience necessary, just a willingness to help.”

The free ESL classes are offered through the Soldier and Family Readiness Division’s Relocation Readiness Program. Community members can register for the beginner or intermediate ESL class by visiting the Family Resource Center, Bldg. 11042 on Mount Belvedere Boulevard.

Beginner classes are 9-11 a.m., and intermediate classes meet from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., both on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

“ESL empowers spouses and Soldiers,” Sharkey said. “It gives them the ability to better communicate with the world around them and a chance to grow their jobs into careers. And it gives them a chance to make those personal connections and new friends we all need at a new installation.”

For more information, call (315) 772-6566 or visit www.facebook.com/Fort-Drum-Relocation-Readiness-Program-171335822906429 <http://www.facebook.com/Fort-Drum-Relocation-Readiness-Program-171335822906429>.

Photo Caption: Fort Drum Soldiers and family members can register for English as a Second Language classes through the Relocation Readiness Program at the Family Resource Center. The free classes give community members a way to strengthen language skills, build confidence and connect with other Soldiers and family members. (Photo by Mike Strasser, Fort Drum Garrison Public Affairs)

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