

52 SHADES OF SUCCESS | THE LATINO INFLUENCE



ITS MISSION: LANGUAGE JUSTICE

Durham's tilde Language Justice Cooperative and its team of worker/owners are working to improve language access and empower communications

STORY BY CONNIE GENTRY | PHOTO BY MEHMET DEMIRCI

Those of us in the English-speaking majority tend to take communicating for granted, so conversations about the need for “language justice” or “language access” can seem esoteric, even contrived.

Until we see reports from the Migration Policy Institute that indicate there are roughly 380,000 foreign-born residents in North Carolina who have limited English proficiency. And that includes more than 109,000 immigrants who have become naturalized U.S. citizens.

Specific to the Hispanic and Latino communities, over half a million adult Carolinians say Spanish is the language spoken in their homes – and more than 258,000 of them report having limited proficiency in English.

On the positive side, half of those Span-

ish-speaking adults say they speak English “very well,” and among the roughly quarter-million North Carolina children, ages 5-17, who live in Spanish-speaking homes, 80 percent speak English very well. Progress is being made, and much of it is driven by organizations like Durham-based tilde Language Justice Cooperative.

Ron Garcia-Fogarty, co-founder and one of the 12 worker/owners at tilde, lived in Nicaragua until he was 18 and, since his mother is American, he grew up speaking English and Spanish.

“Even when we started tilde in 2017, some organizations were budgeting for interpreting and translation, and we’ve seen that become more the case, where organizations are prioritizing language services in their budgets,” he says.

Nonprofit organizations are a large part

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

The 52 Shades of Success – The Latino Influence explores the challenges and opportunities of individuals and businesses run by those in the Latin American community from all across the greater Raleigh-Durham metro area. This 52-week project will also dive into important trends and issues relating to the DEI sector.

of tilde’s client base, as well as local governments, universities, parent teacher associations and political action committees.

“Organizations that receive funding from the federal government are mandated to provide services in whatever languages the community they serve are speaking, and we’re seeing more of an effort to engage on that,” Garcia-Fogarty says, noting that there is still a lot of language justice areas to be addressed.

“There is a lot of polemic in this country around immigration issues, a lot of discrimination against immigrants, despite that they all pay taxes whether they’re documented or not ... and there is a lot of angry, divisive rhetoric that exists in this country, that hasn’t changed.”

In addition to providing translation and interpreting services – tilde employs

▲
Ron Garcia-Fogarty,
co-founder
of tilde
Language
Justice
Cooperative



TILDE LANGUAGE JUSTICE COOPERATIVE

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Website: tilde.coop
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Ron Garcia-Fogarty
 co-founder and worker/owner
Started: 2017
Revenue: \$700,000
Worker/owners: 12
Contractors: 60

“We’re seeing AI coming into interpreting and translating. It’s not going to replace humans overnight, but we are going to need to continue to adapt.”

We’ve been using technology tools on translation since we started at tilde, but that continues to evolve, and some automatic interpreting is being beta tested.

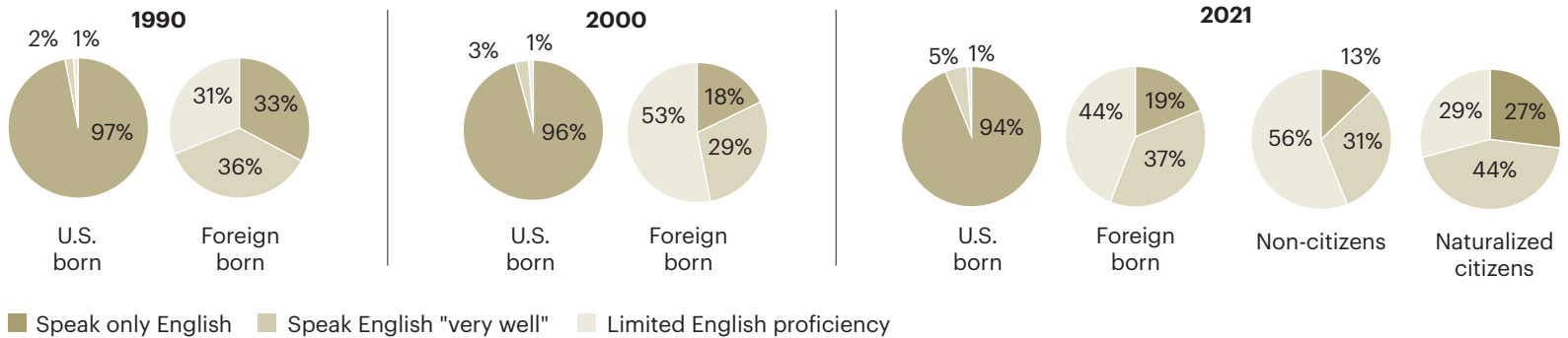
But we’re going to need the human element for the foreseeable future because machines just aren’t able to capture the nuances in language, and that can lead to some very costly mistakes.”

RON GARCIA-FOGARTY

LANGUAGE BARRIERS

The need for language justice is most pronounced among foreign-born North Carolinians: 44% have limited English proficiency, and 56% of foreign-born residents who are not citizens of the U.S. have limited English.

English proficiency (ages 5 and older)



Languages spoken in NC homes

Children and youth, ages 5-17, who speak Spanish or other languages beside English at home are more likely to also speak English "very well."

	Ages 5-17	Ages 18-64	65 and Older
Speak only English	84%	87%	95%
Speak language other than English	16%	13%	5%
And speak English "very well"	12%	8%	2%
Have limited English proficiency	4%	6%	3%
Speak Spanish	13%	8%	2%
And speak English "very well"	10%	4%	1%
Have limited English proficiency	3%	4%	1%

Source: Migration Policy Institute

60 contractors to help cover these assignments – the worker/owned cooperative also provides capacity building services for organizations that are looking to improve their understanding of language justice and language access.

“People have different understandings of what each term means, language justice and language access, but we see them both as important. Language justice has more to do with how to access power regardless of the language you communicate in, and being able to freely communicate in whatever language you speak or write,” he says. On a more basic level, language access is about helping people utilize the resources and information they need for education, health care and other essentials regardless of whether they speak English.

UNC-Chapel Hill has utilized tilde’s interpretation and translation services for a number of years, both in programs at its Institute for the Study of the Americas (ISA) and, more recently, in supporting its statewide Language Access Collaborative. “The Language Access Collaborative is partnering with local governments and community organization teams to create language access plans for their cities, towns and counties,” says Hannah Gill, associate director of ISA. “While our staff does some translation and interpretation, we have contracted with tilde and

other language services to make this program completely bilingual in Spanish and English, which enables municipal plans to be informed by the residents living in those communities.”

This work “raises awareness of the value of language justice,” she says, adding the hope is that most of the state’s municipalities will begin to provide meaningful language access. “Tilde plays an important role in modeling what language justice and language access can look like in practice,” Gill says.

In whatever capacity they are serving, tilde workers remain cognizant of the audience and the industry they’re communicating with.

“There is very specialized terminology in different sectors, so we make sure the interpreters assigned to client events have experience in that context,” says Garcia-Fogarty. There are some areas they don’t work in, such as the courts systems or medical appointments, but they do interpret for immigration appointments and for people seeking a green card, and for public health events.

Carol Bono, communications manager and lead storyteller at LatinxED, has worked with tilde frequently and appreciates how seamlessly they integrate into a presentation or setting.

“Considering how rich and vast the

Latino demographic is in North Carolina, interpreters need to understand who the audience is and if the demographic is more Mexican, Central American or South American so they can be talking with Spanish understood by the majority of people,” Bono says. “And when you consider the age range of your audience, inclusive language is another thread that has to be woven into Spanish interpretation. In our interactions with tilde they have been so mindful of meeting us where we are and ensuring that the interpretation is not going to turn off any person in our audience.”

Most of the translators and interpreters that tilde has contracted to work for them have some degree of social justice background, or they have extensively lived experiences that inform their communications.

“With advocacy and lobbying groups, or some of our LGBTQ groups, there are a lot of terms that are not known outside of the nonprofit or social justice sector,” says Garcia-Fogarty. “One thing we’re seeing now is AI coming in, that is not going to replace humans overnight but we are going to need to continue to adapt ... there is some automatic interpreting that’s being beta tested, but we’re still going to need the human element for the foreseeable future because machines just aren’t able to capture the nuances in language, and that can lead to some very dangerous and costly mistakes, there have been multimillion-dollar lawsuits for things that have been misinterpreted in the medical or legal context.”

For Bono, who grew up in Guatemala, “where bilingualism is the norm,” arriving in the states in 2016 and finding so few bilingual people was shocking. “I grew up speaking English and Spanish, then coming to this context where that was not the norm, I found that very odd,” she says.

“The value that multilingualism brings to businesses can’t be overemphasized,” Bono says. “Language justice is attached to the folks in leadership positions that can make those decisions that will value bilingual education and a multilingual staff, it all connects to the bigger picture.”