

## **Beatriz Eugenia Gomez, 60, Colombia (Gesu Catholic Church and Senior Center)**

Beatriz Eugenia Gomez has emigrated to the United States twice. In 1970 she moved from her hometown in Medellin, Colombia, to New York City, where she spent seven years living and working. Circumstances took her back to Colombia during a period of time characterized by a significant amount of conflict among government forces, competing guerilla movements and drug cartels. By 2000 Gomez and her family were physically threatened by members of one of the insurgent groups, and she returned to the United States



and settled in Miami with her daughter and grandchild. One thing she noticed during her most recent time living in Colombia was the rapid adoption of computers by the younger generation. "I saw that people were on computers, but I always felt a little intimidated by them and wasn't sure if I had the ability to learn how to use them," she said. Once back in the United States, she saw computers all over the place, so she made a few efforts to learn how to use them. "It was not successful. In those early days, the folks who tried to teach me would lose patience with me. I did not think I would ever be able to learn." As a parishioner of Gesu, she heard about the Elevate Miami program from the pulpit, as the pastor,

Father Alvarez, informed the congregation and encouraged people to sign up for the program. The results have been extremely encouraging. "The biggest thing that struck me about the program is how patient everybody has been. They take into account the age group of these seniors. We are able to make progress everyday — and as an additional benefit, I even have an opportunity to learn more English terms," Gomez said. There has been one aspect of the program that has been disconcerting to her, though. "For all of my life, I have been very afraid of mice ... so the idea that I spend my days playing with a mouse at my computer has been a little bit an adjustment," she said, laughing.

## **Gabriel Hernandez, 67, Cuba (Gesu Catholic Church and Senior Center)**

Gabriel Hernandez is an intellectually curious man who is intensely interested in global affairs, current developments and technology. He came to the United States from Cuba 19 years ago, leaving behind an administrative position with the government and many members of his family. Upon arriving, Hernandez studied at a technical community college, where he brushed up on his administrative and technical skills for his work. "I have worked with computers in both the United States and Cuba. What fascinates me about computers is how fast advanced technology has evolved and what a great opportunity it provides for someone like me to be connected to world events." As one of the student leaders in the Gesu Catholic Church's computer lab, Hernandez works with the teachers to help members of the community learn to use computer technology. "It has been great. And you can see how the program increases the self-esteem of the participants in this program who are, for the most part, people of an older age," he said.



Participating in the Elevate Miami program is part of his lifelong commitment to staying current with technology. “I feel like I am now positioned to take advantage of any technology so that when Microsoft develops the next major development — say, nanotechnology — I hope to be able to appreciate and participate in that as well,” he said.

### **Nery and Nestor Olivier, 82 and 80, Cuba (Gesu Catholic Church and Senior Center)**

Nery and Nestor Olivier get up at six in the morning every day so they can be sure to catch the seven o'clock bus that starts their two-hour journey to the Gesu Catholic Church. Once there, they pursue their new passion: learning about computers, networks and digital communications. For this immigrant couple



from Cuba, the early mornings and the work at the Gesu Center is part of an earnest commitment to remaining a vibrant part of society. “I retired 12 years ago after a very active working life,” Nery said, pointing out that the last thing she and her husband wanted was to be inactive in retirement. “The Elevate Miami program offered at the Gesu Church has provided us with an opportunity to really get connected and stay more active. The great thing is that we not only do more things now at the church, but with computers we can do more things from home as well.” Since starting the

course in August 2007, the couple has been able to make use of a home computer that previously sat in their living room largely unused. “I have tried to take computer classes in other places. It was not a good experience,” Nery said. “The people at Gesu understand the needs and interests of people in our age group and have been able to bring us into the modern world. Now we feel much more connected to — and not divorced from — modern society.”

“We have been married for 50 years and we have done everything together in those 50 years,” Nestor said. “This is yet another activity we can pursue together. It has allowed us to communicate with family in Cuba on a regular basis.” An avid sports fan, Nestor has been able to use the resources at Gesu to track the athletic events he loves — from boxing to soccer — all over the world. “I am also a voracious reader. Now I can review newspapers from all over the world — from Spain to Latin America.” It is, they both agree, a fine thing to look forward to when they wake up at 6 a.m.

### **Maria Rico, 77, Colombia (Gesu Catholic Church and Senior Center)**

Learning has not come easy for Maria Rico. But it is not because of a lack of talent or desire. It is because when she was young and living in the interior provinces of Colombia, it was not appropriate for a female to get a formal education. “I was raised by my mother because my father died before I was born. I was allowed to go to school for only six months when I was a girl,” Rico said. “Women were not encouraged to learn where I came from. It was considered a man’s activity. So as soon as I had some very basic reading skills, I was made to go to work.” Work is what she did while living in Colombia, and it is what she continued to do when she came to the United States in 1978. “It was on Aug. 25,” she said. “I will never forget that day. But I was busy working here in the United States, so learning opportunities did not present themselves often.” Her interest in learning, however, did not wane. Eventually she retired. Today she



volunteers at the Gesu Church; consequently, she learned about the Elevate Miami program, one of the few learning opportunities to come her way. "The secretary at the parish told me about the program. So when the time came to sign up for classes, I did not hesitate. I had tried taking classes in other places before at a community college. But the pace was too fast. In addition, I did not pass the final test and was asked to repeat the class at a later time. I heard about Elevate Miami at Gesu and decided to join the program. I have been very motivated at Gesu. The teachers have been so understanding and patient. There has not been any pressure." She is still learning how to send e-mail and continues to struggle with writing, but she loves to do it no matter how long it takes. She has a grandson serving in Japan with the Marines with whom the staff helps her correspond. "It is such a big blessing."

### **Emilse Torne, 70, Colombia (Gesu Catholic Church and Senior Center)**

For Emilse Torne, a 70-year-old woman originally from Barranquilla, Colombia, learning about computers has become a new obsession. "My doctor told me that as my body gets older, it is important to stay active and engaged. The doctor also told me that my body may be getting older but the mind stays very young.



And learning here at the Gesu Center about computers, I can see how that is true," Torne said. She became aware of the program from a friend who lives in her building. "The minute I heard about it, I got right up and walked right over to join up," she said. She saw it as an opportunity to stay connected to her grandchildren. "It has been such a blessing," she said. "I have been getting requests for years from my grandchildren to get online so we can exchange e-mails and photographs and things like that. I just did not know how to do it." Today Torne visits the center almost every morning. "It doesn't matter what's going on with the

weather. It may be raining — but especially on days that I have classes, I get up and go right to class." She does not have a computer at home, and so she uses the computers after the course offerings to keep in touch with family and keep abreast of developments in Colombia and around the world. Clearly proud of her growing expertise with computers, she is not only able to perform tasks for herself, but now can also help others who are just entering the program. "I recently sat in on a basic introduction to computer class that I had already taken at the Gesu Center. I knew a lot of what was going on. I was surprised by how much I had learned already. As a result, I was able to help some of my fellow students. That was very empowering," she said.

### **Concha Watson, 84, Colombia (Gesu Catholic Church and Senior Center)**

A reporter who was once on the writing staff of Colombia's major daily newspaper, *El Tiempo*, as a social reporter for *Manizales*, Concha Watson is an observer who likes to document the sights and sounds that surround her. Finding an outlet for her writing has been more challenging since she retired. Since she moved to the United States, the problem has been exacerbated by her lack of English language skills. Watson is a widower who was married for 44 years to an American. "Unfortunately, he did such a good job of learning Spanish that English was not required in our marriage," she said, laughing impishly. While she continues to write about daily life and has a talent for turning a phrase and making acute observations, the recent years have brought her a certain sense of



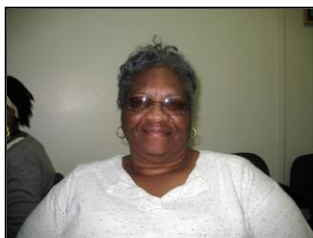
loneliness. “In some ways I have felt like a victim of my circumstances. I was not communicating as often with my friends and family. And talking with people in other parts of the world over the phone gets expensive,” she said. Even within her own neighborhood, she found it increasingly difficult to connect with friends and neighbors. “Younger friends are busy at work, and older friends often just stay at home — also isolated.” It is a situation that has been completely reversed for her with the introduction of the Elevate Miami program at the Gesu Catholic Church. Learning about computers has not only given her a new opportunity to learn something new, but it has also given her a new outlet for her writing. “I like to write about everyday life and capture the daily routines that drive folks. Now I have a way of sharing what I write with people — to remind them of the moments of happiness,” she said. “This is especially important during bitter times. If I can remind people of the drops of honey that have fallen into their life, I hope it will help them deal with the bitter times as well. So that is what the Elevate Miami program at Gesu has done for me. It has cut the cords that were threatening to tie me to loneliness.

### **Zoila Arévalo, 95, Guatemala (Jack Orr Senior Center)**

It is a pleasure for me to give my honest and sincere thoughts on my experience with respect to the Elevate Miami *eSeniors* program. This program is a wonder for every person. 1. Because it motivates and teaches you about thoughts and ideas that one could have never imagined. 2. It puts you in contact with the latest inventions and most recent discoveries. 3. It allows you to communicate with other worlds which are difficult to visit in person. 4. For we senior citizens, this program helps us to forget about our loneliness and daily life. For these same reasons, I advise other older people that have also been



affected by this beautiful program to give thanks to the people who have taken the time to care about us. I barely know anything about computers, but I love it now. I would be so happy if I am able to have a small computer of my own to be able to practice my skills. But, thankfully I was able to find these free classes and two marvelous people who are extraordinarily patient and understanding towards the senior citizens. The teachers are Ms. Maria Martorell and David Bonilla. They are excellent people; may God bless them. I also want to add that there is a large amount of camaraderie among the classmates; we motivate one another and make each other feel happy.



### **Monia Hughes, 61, Georgia (Jack Orr Senior Center)**

This is just my opinion concerning senior programs in Dade County that I have been involved in. It is what the individual wants to do for themselves to enhance their life or lifestyle. Whether you are learning or re-learning, it's a good thing for all those that wish to keep on going.

### **Melva Navarro, Panama (Jack Orr Senior Center)**

I am very grateful for the people that have given us the opportunity to participate as a student in the computer classes at Jack Orr Senior Center. It has been a great help to both myself and my classmates.

For me personally, the classes serve me well everyday and I enjoy them greatly because my husband too is taking the classes, and he now has something to do; something to entertain himself with and distract his mind while searching for interesting things on the Internet, while also paying bills. He now doesn't have to run around looking for stamps or envelopes or any of these things that complicate daily life. The Internet has facilitated everything for us.



We have also had the opportunity of purchasing hardware at a low cost. I now don't experience the nostalgia and depression that being far away from my family caused me because I now have the ability to see them every day through my web camera and online chatting.

I have also learned games which help to enrich our knowledge. These online games also give prizes for participating so what else could I ask for!

Let me relay again my sincerest thanks to the entire team of people that have made these much-needed classes possible, and a special thank you to Ms. Maria and young David for their dedication and patience in teaching us, step by step, everyday.