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## NEWS RELEASE

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# Beloved Covina-Valley Adult Education Instructor to Retire After More Than 50 Years as ESL, Sewing Teacher

**COVINA, CA** – Tri-Community Adult Education/Pioneer Center English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher Cornella VerHalen has always had a love of teaching and a passion for sewing. In her more than 50 years as an ESL and sewing teacher, VerHalen has worked to enrich the lives of newly arrived immigrants and residents, giving them the tools and confidence to succeed in a new country.

VerHalen, who just celebrated her 90th birthday, will retire from the Pioneer Center at the end of the fall semester, closing a chapter in a teaching career that began when Richard Nixon was president, “Marcus Welby M.D.” was the top-rated television program and the Jackson 5 were emerging as America’s newest pop music sensations.

VerHalen was married with four sons and had a credential in sewing, learning the craft from a designer trained in Paris, when she first volunteered at Tri-Community in 1970. After mastering the “stretch and sew” technique, she found herself teaching eight classes a week, with many students on a waiting list.

In 1974, a colleague who taught ESL brought students into VerHalen’s sewing class. VerHalen discovered that the art of sewing fit well with learning a new language, the hands-on activity providing an opportunity to discuss the sewing process step-by-step. Within the year, VerHalen was teaching ESL to scores of Vietnamese immigrants. Not content to teach exclusively from a book, VerHalen began organizing field trips throughout Southern California to give her students exposure to English in a variety of settings.

“I’ve had a very interesting life and met so many interesting people. Really, I just love to teach and be active,” VerHalen said. “I began teaching ESL in 1975 when it was a new thing. As a result, I have a much different approach to teaching it. I developed my own system that allowed me to really engage with my students.”

VerHalen’s classes became very popular, with students studying so intently that they did not notice when class had ended. Eventually, she began hosting Tri-Community students at her home, where they would read, sew, eat, and bond. Many of VerHalen’s students, who hail from all over the world, have become part of her extended family.

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“Cornella’s story really is incredible,” Pioneer Center Principal Ryan Maddox said. “She has an amazing heart for teaching and helping her students along their path to learning and improving their English. She openly gives her free time to tutor and help any student who is willing to take the time to learn. When I think of all the students she has impacted over 52 years of teaching, it is inspiring.”

More than 30 years ago, VerHalen met a 23-year-old ESL student from Thailand named Somchai Vongpiansuksa. She invited him to live at her house while he studied, and Vongpiansuksa stayed for seven years before moving away and starting his own family. Today, Vongpiansuksa is the owner of the popular Palms Thai restaurant in Hollywood. The two families are so close that they celebrate Thanksgiving and Christmas at VerHalen’s home, and all his children refer to her as “grandma.”

“I was very young when I met Cornella,” Vongpiansuksa said. “I asked her for help and she was very supportive. From then on, I went to school and she became like my stepmother. Sometimes we would argue a lot because she is very strict. But she is a teacher and a mother and our families have become very close over the years. She has taught me so much.”

Though VerHalen is retiring from Pioneer, she will continue to keep her door open for students who wish to bolster their English, sewing and communication skills. One future student may be Covina-Valley Unified Superintendent Dr. Elizabeth Eminhizer, who surprised VerHalen in her classroom with a bouquet of flowers to celebrate her 90th birthday and retirement announcement. During her visit, Dr. Eminhizer asked VerHalen if she could teach her to sew.

“Cornella VerHalen is part of the heart and soul of Covina-Valley Unified, a beloved educator who has dedicated her life to helping others,” Dr. Eminhizer said. “What amazes me the most about Cornella is her boundless energy and quest for knowledge. She may be retiring from the District, but she will be a teacher, friend, and role model forever. We wish Cornella all the best in her future endeavors.”

#### **PHOTO CAPTIONS:**

**CVUSD\_CORNELLA1:** Cornella VerHalen receives a bouquet of flowers from Superintendent Dr. Elizabeth Eminhizer in celebration of her 90th birthday and retirement announcement. The ESL teacher will be retiring this winter after more than 50 years with the Covina-Valley Unified School District.

**CVUSD\_CORNELLA2:** Cornella VerHalen teaches students English as a Second Language (ESL) at Tri-Community Adult Education/Pioneer Center. She will be retiring this winter after more than 50 years with the Covina-Valley Unified School District.

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