

INTEGRATING WITHIN THE COMMUNITY:

A MOTHER AND DAUGHTER FIND SUCCESS IN A NEW COUNTRY

By Jennifer Dennis • May 19th 2021



MAGGIE GIL, HER MOTHER, MARGARITA URIBE, AND HER HUSBAND, FERNANDO



MAGGIE (RIGHT) WITH A FRIEND FROM THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROGRAM

When Margarita and her daughter Maggie first came to Flagstaff, they felt as if they were in another world. Everything was contrary to their native city of Medellín, Colombia - from the taste of food to the style of dress to the way in which people drove.

In the beginning, neither could communicate in English. Their arrival to the Las Vegas airport was distressing. Unable to call anyone for help, they waited several hours to pass through immigration, using gestures to make themselves understood.

Arriving in Flagstaff, they encountered a frigid and grey first winter that neither had experienced before. Maggie, then still a teenager, had a difficult time understanding why she had to leave her home and her friends, learn English, and start over. In Colombia, her mom had met a professor of Microbiology from Northern Arizona University whom she later married. Her move was inevitable.

Although happy in her new relationship, Margarita also struggled in the early days after the move. While she laughs about it now, she recalls always praying before leaving the house to run errands, hoping to encounter someone who could speak Spanish that might help her.

Only four years later, Maggie would be giving the commencement speech at Coconino Community College's (CCC's) 2021 graduation ceremony with perfect fluency, and Margarita would find herself working as an accountant for a small company.

HERE IS THEIR STORY TOWARD SUCCESS:

Soon after arriving in Flagstaff, both mother and daughter found services at the Literacy Center, in Flagstaff, and also enrolled in classes at CCC's English Language Adult Education Program.

Debra Goldenstein, their first English language teacher at CCC, fondly recalls the pair coming to meet her to inquire about classes. Both were outgoing, upbeat, and expressive, but could barely speak. However, it didn't take long for both of them to adapt and become immersed in the language and culture.

In the CCC ESL classes they both always befriended other students and took advantage of practicing the language. I remember Maggie befriending other students from class and encouraging them to meet with her outside of class to enjoy other activities, while also practicing their English. This included things like going to the mall or playing a friendly game of soccer. Maggie was so devoted to immersing herself in the language because she knew it was the best way for her to quickly become fluent in English and be able to pursue her dreams. Maggie's outgoing personality and kindness also emerged during class as she often took new students under her wing and helped them feel comfortable and confident in their new environment. Debra Goldenstein - English Language Instructor



MARGARITA (LEFT) WITH TWO OF HER CLASSMATES



MAGGIE IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

When asked what they have enjoyed most about the English language classes, they both enthusiastically mention their teachers and the classroom environment.

I love my teachers. I love the environment. It's fun, and I enjoy my space with my classmates. I feel comfortable, and equal with my classmates. - Margarita

It's a space for inclusion. Sometimes when people move or they are forced to come for any reason [to the US], they are so overwhelmed, but this class brings a safe place. You go, and you can make mistakes, but you learn from those mistakes, and from your teachers and classmates, and it's completely okay. You don't feel bad; You don't feel nervous, and you start to build up your confidence. - Maggie

Maggie and Margarita often tried to separate during class time to allow each other to have space to speak English with others. Maggie explains that at times, it was stressful to have her mom so close all of the time because they were always together, day and night. But, seeing her mom try so hard inspired her not to give up.

In addition to her mom, Maggie's classmates also had a huge impact on her.

Seeing everyone's example and how everyone's life was so different, I knew that my background was not as harsh as my other classmates. I was always thinking that my classmates had to go to work; they had children; they had spouses. And, they were trying to learn a new language. They were having a hard time but they were always willing to make you laugh or talk and ask you how your day was. All of that positive environment changed my vision. People were really struggling, but they were trying to make their dreams come true. - Maggie

Within her first year in the United States, Maggie began volunteering at a local pre-school which later became her job for three years. This enabled her to work with children and their families whom she would often see in her free time throughout the community. Working with children had its challenges, yet it was also opportune.

It was difficult in the beginning. I was watching the kids, making sure they wouldn't fight or do anything dangerous. Of course, I needed to talk to them. Kids are super kind and honest. They would come to me, and say "Miss Maggie, this is how you say the word or this is how you pronounce the word." It was challenging, but it was rewarding because the kids were guiding me and teaching me. After four months working there, I was reading to them, and I was having full conversations with them. - Maggie

Margarita also found work in Flagstaff as an accountant. She was very happy because she was able to utilize her extensive background and experience from years of working at a bank in Colombia. This new position required her to learn an entirely different vocabulary skill set related to finance. For months, she exhaustively immersed herself in texts to gain more knowledge of the appropriate language necessary for her new position.

My job was the principal way to develop a relationship with the community. I could do my work for others. I could serve others, do things for others. I remember I spent so much time reading and watching videos, reading manuals. I kept saying, I can do it. I can do it. - Margarita



MAGGIE ON GRADUATION DAY AT CCC, HOLDING HER COMMENCEMENT SPEECH

Four years after arriving during that first dreary winter, Margarita and Maggie are at ease in their new home of Flagstaff which they affirm as much safer than their previous home. They now enjoy the weather, and are active outdoors.

I changed my perspective because I thought living in a big city had everything you needed, but sometimes living in a small city, which is my case now, is everything I need. I have peace of mind. I don't need to worry about traffic. I just really enjoy staying here, knowing that I'm safe, knowing that I'm breathing clean, healthy air. - Maggie

For the moment, Margarita intends to continue taking English language classes at CCC, help and encourage her fellow classmates, and work in her accounting position.

As for Maggie, upon achieving her associate's degree at Coconino Community College, she was asked to give this year's commencement speech to her graduating class. Although nervous, she spoke confidently, and with authority. This is a major achievement for someone who, only four years ago, was unable to express herself at all in English.

She is now enrolled in Northern Arizona University's Early Childhood and Special Education degree program. She already has one semester under her belt. In the future, she would like to find work at an elementary school. Beyond that, she says that she has not made any other plans because as she has learned, life can change quickly.

Maggie's advice for other language learners:

Learning a language is learning another culture, and learning another world. I was hesitant at first, understanding why I needed to do this. I didn't think I had the energy or the will. My advice for others is don't worry, you're doing your best. If you go to ESL classes you will feel you are in a safe place. It's a place you can be yourself, and no one will judge you. You will need to have an open mind to understand the diversity of the students, but it's a rewarding experience; it's worth it.

I tried to have an open mind and understand why I needed to do this. I'm glad I chose to stay. I didn't give up. Now I'm seeing all of the hard work I put into learning the language and working hard. Now I can see it.

Also, I will say, respect the teacher's time. You need to be committed. Now that I have been teaching kids, I see how much effort the teacher needs to plan a lesson and engage a student, so I think students need to be present and show interest. That's how you will respect your professors. - Maggie

Lastly, Maggie thanks Coconino Community College for all of the opportunities she has had:

All this journey is possible because of wonderful professors and a wonderful CCC community. Regardless of what you are learning, the college has a good vision. They want all of their students regardless of their background to be successful. I thank CCC for allowing this ESL program to exist. I feel very grateful for this. If this wouldn't have existed, I don't know what we would be doing. I give all my gratitude to CCC. - Maggie