

IT WAS MY GREATEST DAY

By Jennifer Dennis • March 12th 2021



MONTSERRAT RODRIQUEZ



MONTSERRAT AT HER NATURALIZATION CEREMONY

Montserrat Rodriguez recalls the day she received her U.S. citizenship as a mix of nerves, anticipation, and excitement. With her family viewing the ceremony in support, she took an oath of allegiance to a new country. She describes the experience as joyous and emotional.

Prior to this day, Montserrat had been studying English at Coconino Community College's Adult Education program. Coming to the program with an intermediate to advanced level of English, she enrolled in the Civics and Citizenship course. In the beginning, she confesses feeling somewhat intimidated to speak, but observing the other students' ability to converse in two languages, gave her motivation.

In the class, she was engaged in topics of U.S. history, and frequently reviewed the 100 questions for the citizenship test. While becoming more aware of her language ability, she became more at ease with speaking, and she began to consider what it would be like to obtain U.S. citizenship.

The classes are better than just studying the [citizenship test] questions. I like to know all the context, not just the answers. The teacher is really passionate about the history of the United States, and she is really good at explaining all the information. And, she makes it easy to remember everything. You can understand so many things that happened in the past; It's really interesting all the things we had to pass to be where we are now.

For most of her life, Montserrat lived in Villa Hidalgo, a small town in Jalisco, Mexico. She received her residency to live in the United States when she was 18, after her father and brother had moved to Arizona for work. Yet, she remained in Mexico to complete her college education, receiving a degree in marketing.

Still, it was her intention to reunite with her family in the United States. After gaining two years of experience working in marketing and administration for a company in Mexico, she decided it was time. The year was 2016.

Everyone talks about how the United States is a better place to live, a safer place for a woman, because circumstances [in Mexico] are not so good, not in my town, but in many other places.

It wasn't until 2019, that Montserrat found the adult education classes at Coconino Community College. She originally enrolled with her sister, Alondra, and her sister-in-law, Mayela. The girls also worked together at their relatives' family-owned restaurant, Tacos los Altos, in Flagstaff. Alondra would later return to live in Mexico, leaving the other two to finish the class.

With the encouragement of her teacher, both Montserrat and Mayela scheduled an appointment to take the test. Both were extremely nervous. Despite knowing all of the questions, they feared making



MONTSERRAT WITH HER SISTER-IN-LAW MAYELA



MONTSERRAT HIKING IN SEDONA

mistakes or saying the wrong thing during the interview. They were also apprehensive about how the interviewer would address them, anticipating someone authoritative and intimidating. But, she found the people at the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services to be friendly and helpful.

It was really hard work. Just to take that step. You have to study hard to pass the test, and prove you know the language. I knew the history; I knew the questions; I knew all of it because of the class, but sometimes when I get really nervous I will say something in Spanish instead of English.

Both Montserrat and Mayela passed their citizenship test and attended each others' ceremonies in February of 2020. Among them were people of various nationalities and backgrounds, each present as a result of unique circumstances.

I was nervous and really happy, I was just so emotional, seeing all the people there at the ceremony when we took the oath of allegiance. It was beautiful. There were a lot of people celebrating. You could feel special to be there.

She recalls sitting next to a young, Syrian girl who had escaped her country due to violence.

I heard others' stories. And I thought, thank god my situation was not like others, those who had to escape violence and other bad situations. They really deserve to be here in this country. The girl sitting next to me, she was in danger and she was just a child. I thank god that was not my story.

It's been a year since Montserrat attended her ceremony. With her status as a citizen, she even voted in the 2020 presidential election. She had some advice for new voters.

You need to do research, and not get influenced by the opinion of other people. You need to create your own one. I researched the president, the senators, and other people to know who to vote for. You need to make your own decisions.

These days, Montserrat divides her time between studying English, and enjoying the landscape of Northern Arizona. Hiking has become her new hobby.

I really like the mountains; there's so much nature here [in Flagstaff]; I can go to the park, and there are so many views. I love the sky at night; you can see all the stars and the moon.

As for the future, Montserrat considers the possibility of pursuing a Master's degree, and has hopes of one day opening up her own restaurant. Until then, her goal is to see more of the United States. After the pandemic subsides, she plans to hike the trails at Yosemite National Park, and also visit Broadway in New York.

Her advice for anyone moving to another country is this:

You need to be open minded because you are going to see different people and cultures. And, you need to be respectful. If you're going to learn another language, my advice is don't get scared when you talk, just try it, and it will flow.