

Learning to spell s-u-c-c-e-s-s

Literacy Council helps immigrant develop English

By Howard Huntington
of the Daily Courier

The Literacy Council for Josephine County considers Maria Huerta one of its greatest successes.

In an interview and in writing, Huerta told how she went from clueless immigrant to nursing student at Rogue Community College in Grants Pass.

Huerta is from Mexico. "In my country, I had a little bit of education. I grew up in a tiny village. I was able to attend school for maybe two years. It was difficult for me to get to school because of the place I lived."

She was in her late 20s when she immigrated to the U.S. in 1988 — alone and with no knowledge of English.

Huerta went to work for a fruit company in Medford and later in a gladiola processing plant and a Mexican restaurant.

English was a struggle. "To be able to ask questions, to follow a conversation. The hardest thing for me, I think, is the pronunciation of words. I hear people talking in English. If they start fast, I don't have any clue about what they are talking about.

"It's still very hard. It's not easy for me to adapt to that culture."

Along the way, she married Ramito Gonzalez and started a family. "After my three kids were born, starting in 1999 through 2003, I stayed home to care for them. My youngest daughter started Head Start in Grants Pass in 2007. I noticed that the Literacy Council was in the building next to the one where Head Start was.

"In my experience during my previous years in the USA, I realized how important it is to know English, so I decided to get tutoring.

"When I showed up to inquire about tutoring, I had to bring my three children with me because I had nobody to leave them with."

Eleanor Hester "became my tutor for over two years, until she moved away, and I considered her one of my best friends. She helped me pass my citizenship test and also helped me with the cost of the application by giving me \$400 from a special fund that the Literacy Council had available.

"At this time I also started classes to get my GED, which she also helped me with." Huerta was later tutored by Jackie Clary and Phil Neill, followed by Connie Crook. With Crook's help, Huerta earned her GED in 2011.



HOWARD HUNTINGTON/Daily Courier

Maria Huerta came to the United States without any knowledge of English, but the Literacy Council helped change that.

At times, the journey had seemed hopeless, but the council was extremely patient and encouraging. "This is the first time I've been in college. But I know how far I can go!" Huerta said with a triumphant laugh. "It's very challenging."

She also wants her children to go to college. "They'll love it. I try to encourage them every day to work hard in school because, in my experience, there is no other way to achieve a better life.

Crook is still working with Huerta on her reading and writing.

"She really has the desire to succeed and to learn more," Crook said. "It's kind of funny because her husband is not interested at all. They do speak Spanish in her home, but, of course, her three children are bilingual.

"She's a U.S. citizen. Her husband has

no interest in becoming a U.S. citizen. And so it's like her own, personal desire, for herself and her family and her children, because she knows that it's going to help everybody if she does really well in mastering English. She's going for a nursing degree at RCC, so she eventually wants to be employed to where, I think, they can buy a home."

Crook said Huerta was already a good reader by the time they started working together, but was weak on spelling. "Of course, word meanings are always a challenge because we have so many idioms and expressions that don't really mean what the actual words mean, but together they mean something different," Crook said.



TIMOTHY BULLARD/Daily Courier

Connie Crooks, left, is helping Maria Huerta with her English skills at the Josephine County Literacy Council. Huerta could not speak or write a word of English upon arrival from Mexico but is now a nursing student at Rogue Community College.

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“We’ve been working on something she’s been wanting to read for a long time. It’s about a migrant worker that became a neurosurgeon. She really loves that story, and it’s a true story. There are very difficult words, and she’ll underline words that she doesn’t understand. It’s amazing how just one word, if you don’t understand the meaning, you don’t usually get the whole gist of it.”

Perhaps just as amazing is that Crook speaks little Spanish. She and Huerta communicate everything in English.

“One great thing about her is that, if somebody comes in while we’re working together and they speak Spanish, she can just go ahead and speak to them, make them feel right at home,” Crook added. “She even recorded a message for the Literacy Council on the telephone, to tell people in Spanish and in English how to get a tutor.”

Huerta also has expressed her thanks by giving birthday and holiday cards to Crook.

“I’ll tell Maria, ‘You don’t need to do this.’” Crook said. “But she says, ‘I know, but I want to!’”

“Another thing, her husband

works for an orchard and he has come out to our property and worked a couple of times, free of charge, doing pruning and weeding,” Crook said. “It’s just a wonderful reciprocation we have going and, of course, we don’t expect people to pay us, literally, by doing that.”

As vice chairwoman of the Literacy Council and Huerta’s onetime tutor in math, Dee Pierce also testified to Huerta’s joy of learning, “the most important thing that a student of ours can have.

“We think it’s quite a significant achievement to go all the way through GED. Many of our students from other countries, particularly from Mexico, have had little or no education,” Pierce said.

And she had one more note about Huerta: “She is an avid gardener — that was evident the first time I went to her house to help her with her computer. Interestingly, her last name, Huerta, means ‘garden’ in Spanish!”

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