

Hispanic Women Offer Valuable Help with Languages

Silvina Sterin Pensel For EDLP

For a young six-year old girl, hearing New Yorkers speak was like listening to a song on the radio. “I loved hearing people talk in English but I wasn’t able to understand a single word,” says Silvia Alvarez. During the 80’s, her mother took Silvia and her brother away from El Salvador before the war could harm them. “Arriving in such a huge, new city and not knowing the language was very difficult,” adds Silvia, who entered the second grade in a school where she was practically the only Hispanic student.

Annerys Soto, a Dominican woman, also had to learn to survive without knowing English when she first arrived to the United States at 17 years old. “My pronunciation was horrible, and everyone spoke so quickly,” she recalls.

Like an indelible fingerprint, this personal and arduous struggle to learn a new language in order to be understood and communicate was ever-present throughout the course of time for these two women. It was not until years later that they discovered the aims of Global Language Project—an organization that teaches Spanish, Chinese, and Arabic to children of humble families living in New York. Having overcome the battle to become completely bilingual in English and Spanish, the two women decided to join the organization.

“I work at a secondary school in the Bronx where I give classes to students with disabilities,” says Annerys. “In 2009 I wanted to work as a volunteer in any kind of organization where I would have been able to use Spanish. That’s when I went on Craigslist and saw the ad for Global Language Project. When I arrived to my interview with Angela Jackson, the founder, I told her, ‘I love the idea, and I am here to help you with anything that you might need.’” The young Dominican woman became the project’s first Spanish teacher and is still volunteering at two schools in Harlem that offer the “Speak to Succeed” program.

Silvia was convinced to join the program by her friend Angela, in a café on 40th Street and 7th Avenue. “I found her enthusiasm to make the idea into a reality contagious,” says the Salvadorian as she recalls that meeting two years ago that made her think back and remember how she went from not knowing a single word of English to becoming the Director of Communications for Mayor Bloomberg. “She didn’t leave me much choice but to become a member of the Board of Directors for Global Language Project,” she says as she laughs. “I know many people,” she affirms as she sits in a luxurious office in the Bloomberg Tower where she currently directs communications for Bloomberg Sports. “I contact organizations that might be interested in helping us whether it be by talking with the kids or donating money to help finance classes as well as class materials,” she explains.

Silvia, 37, lives in Riverdale and works an average of 8 to 9 hours daily. Despite this, she makes time to actively participate in this organization. “I make the time; at night perhaps

I might sit down to write a letter soliciting funds or attend meetings with the Board of Directors on Saturdays to plan future activities.

Annerys Soto, 29, is also very passionate about this activity where she voluntarily offers her time. “I could have had the longest or roughest day at work but when it’s Wednesday and I go to the YMCA, my day takes a totally different turn. As soon as they see me, the second graders come running into my arms and start grabbing my legs. They really value the program and always pay attention. I feel such love for teaching my native language.”

Many of the children who learn languages through GLP come from families with many different backgrounds: “These are families that struggle just to get by everyday; you can tell by the way they are dressed and some of them are even going around hungry,” says Annerys. But this young woman who received her Master of Arts in education manages to keep the little ones focused and happy. “My class is a Broadway show,” she says. “We sing, dance, and I always have them doing something—coloring, or cutting things with scissors—while speaking Spanish.”

The organization has designed apprenticeship programs with the help of educators from New York University and Columbia University. Volunteers like Annerys offer hour-long classes three times a week. Ever since it began at Hamilton Heights School in Harlem, the program has expanded, now serving four schools. The program hopes to begin teaching 6,500 students within the next five years.

“Sometimes the kids shout out Ms. Señorita! Ms. Señorita! I always correct them and say, ‘You’re calling me “señorita twice,’” says Annerys. “It seems like they understand but then two seconds later, they go back to calling me Ms. Señorita! I know that they are learning because I see their little faces coming to life every time we go over something new. This is very rewarding for me.”

For more information, call (646) 462-6947/info@globallanguageproject.org.

Caption underneath first picture:

“Good People”

Caption underneath second picture:

“Annerys Soto, a young woman from the Dominican Republic, is pictured here with her students who are learning Spanish. She is a volunteer teacher at Global Language Project. GLP offers various language classes free of charge to public schools in New York.”

Caption underneath third picture:

“Silvia Alvarez, left, with Angela Jackson, right, her friend and founder of GLP. Silvia is from El Salvador and a member of GLP’s Board of Directors. “I help with what I know how to do best: connect people with people to gather resources.”