

ERASING DOUBT

One woman rediscovers her courage through adult education.

By Jennifer Dennis • November 13th, 2020



JOHANKA AND HER HUSBAND, JERSUS

In 2012, due to increasing political tension and an uncertain economic situation, Johanka Lastra de Colmenares and her husband, Jersus contemplated the difficult decision of leaving Venezuela to seek better opportunities for their family in the United States. This became critical when then-president Hugo Chavez attempted to eliminate the national university system, putting Jersus' teaching position at stake. Searching for other employment at the time seemed futile due to an unlivable minimum wage and three children to support.

We left our life, and especially our families. I felt that I left half of my heart. My mom, my dad, and my siblings...they all left Venezuela for other places, and we became separated between the United States and Chile. My children no longer had their grandparents and they no longer belong to any country.

As a fluent English speaker, Jersus was able to enroll in a PhD program at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, quickly acclimating to professional life in a new country. However, for Johanka, transitioning to a new life with only a few words of English was extremely difficult. Unable to communicate with others outside of her immediate family made her feel increasingly isolated and discouraged. She recalls the moment she realized she needed to make a change.

When I came here for the first time, I didn't speak any words in English and I felt so frustrated because I couldn't help my kids in the school. I could do nothing in this country. One time I remember when I dropped my kids in the school I saw some person from another country use her kids for translation, and I said I don't want this in my life.

At this point, Johanka began searching for English language classes, and came upon the Adult Education Program at Coconino Community College (CCC) where she enrolled in beginner English classes.

When I found this program [at Coconino Community College] I felt this program gave me the tools to be more brave about learning another language. I started learning a lot. I felt like a baby. I started with crawling for vocabulary, numbers, and simple sentences. My first teacher was Debbie, and she had a lot of patience and a lot of dedication. She taught me everything, and she encouraged me to grow to learn English.



JOHANKA, JERSUS, AND THEIR THREE CHILDREN



JOHANKA AND FELLOW CCC ADULT EDUCATION STUDENTS WITH ELAA & ABE INSTRUCTORS DEBRA GOLDENSTEIN & LEAH CLAW AT THE QUEEN CREEK AMBASSADOR PROGRAM



JOHANKA RECEIVING HER AWARD FROM THE AMBASSADOR TRAINING



JOHANKA IN HER OFFICE AT NORTHERN ARIZONA UNIVERSITY

Johanka has consistently attended English language classes in CCC's Adult Education Program for the last six years. While at one time apprehensive and hesitant to speak, she has now gained confidence and assurance, and she recognizes her capabilities and potential, finding new purpose in her life. Progressing far beyond a beginner's level, she now attends the program's advanced English classes.

The classes for me are very formal, very structured. It's like a university class. Every single class I grow with my English, and I feel more comfortable in this country. My teacher Jennifer prepared me to work in this country; to find work. And she encourages me to bring my dreams come true.

During her time in the Adult Education Program, Johanka participated in the Arizona Ambassador Leadership Training held in Queen Creek, Arizona, designed by the Arizona Association for Lifelong Learning. In this training, adult education students build confidence by learning communication skills for the purpose of sharing their personal stories and explaining how adult education has served them. Students then share these stories as a way of advocating for themselves and others in front of people in positions of power as a form of representational leadership.

After returning from the training, Johanka shared her new knowledge with fellow students, and began participating in meetings with local decision makers. In 2016, she met with CCC president Dr. Colleen Smith, to share information about the CCC Adult Education Program.

This experience was amazing. I had the opportunity to share my experience as a student of ESL. I shared my testimony of when I arrived in the US. I had the barrier of language but this program gave me the tools to join in the society. I honestly felt very nervous because in this training I needed to speak with an Arizona representative. Thanks to this program, what I learned was to discover and develop as a leader in my life.

Upon completing the Ambassador Training, Johanka's aspirations began to change. She felt prepared to enter the workforce. In 2019, Johanka became an administrative assistant at Northern Arizona University, working in the department of Global Languages and Cultures. She helps to enroll students and assists with accounting.

And now, she is invested in a new goal. Johanka was recently accepted into a Master's Degree program in Spanish at Northern Arizona University, and will begin in the Spring of 2021.

This is one dream I have. I feel scared but I feel so happy because thanks to this program I can start my new opportunity and goals in this country.