

English helps an advocate find her voice

When Reyna Tejada landed at Logan Airport in 2001, a sense of happiness swept over her. People seemed nice and helpful and an ambiance of welcome surrounded her. She had left behind a singing career and university studies in the Dominican Republic and was convinced that her dream of becoming a doctor and helping her family rise up from poverty was just a few years away.

Within days, Reyna realized that things were not as they seemed. Years of uphill struggle awaited her and her responsibilities as a mother and a wife took precedence over her career dreams. For years Reyna held several jobs, constantly working overtime to make ends meet. “If you don’t speak English you have a big problem. I was staying home feeling ashamed.”

Reyna’s decision to enroll in ESOL classes at Mujeres Unidas en Acción (MUA) came at a critical time. She had relocated herself and her children, and she needed all the support that MUA had to offer to re-start her life. MUA’s ESOL and other Adult Basic Education classes focus on personal and community empowerment.



Photo by Aaron McElroy

Reyna Tejada at work at the bilingual daycare program run by Mujeres Unidas en Acción in Dorchester. A rising advocate for neighborhood parents, Reyna’s nurturing qualities also make her a magnet for children, who often visit her house when their parents are at work.

Reyna began in MUA’s Level 1 English class and advanced to Level 2 in less than three months. As her English improved, so did her confidence, and she enrolled in MUA’s “Despierta” (“Wake Up”) workshop. “Despierta” helped her marshal her experience and strengths in a positive way.

“The program changed my life,” says Reyna. “That’s a very nice program. They take your kids and give you some orientation if you need it. Sometimes I say thank you God, the Hispanic people need this program.”

Reyna, in turn, has been a role model for other students. “MUA students

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Mujeres Unidas en Acción, Inc.

Mujeres Unidas en Acción (MUA) works to strengthen the voice of low-income Latina women and to empower Latino families to participate actively in political, social and economic life.

Since 1979 MUA has helped over 5,000 women with adult basic education classes; a daycare center; individual support and counseling services; and “Proyecto Compañera,” which offers support groups, career workshops, certificate programs on topics such as AIDS, domestic violence prevention, prenatal care and self-esteem.

Adult Basic Education Programs

English for Speakers of Other Languages: MUA uses the participatory approach of educator Paulo Freire, in which students’ life experiences drive the curriculum. The program serves 160 students in three levels each year.

Native Language Literacy and GED in Spanish: Classes help students prepare to take the GED in Spanish.

Computer Literacy: Three levels of instruction begin with a bilingual computer basics class.

Number served annually: 350
Current waitlist: 138

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Photo: Aaron McElroy

"I told the city officials that in my community we need a park for the kids, they need more recreation. I say, not for me, the kids, they need it."

-Reyna Tejada

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are drawn to Reyna's down-to-earth nature and strength," says Felisa White, MUA Program Coordinator. "Whatever she has done she fought for. She tells all the other women 'Don't think now that if you are getting food stamps you can relax. You've got to earn those things. You've got to be able to be on your own.' They all know who Reyna is."

Reyna also is a leader in her neighborhood. She explains, "I help my community with their orientation to the U.S. culture. If there is something broken, I can call City Council or other people. Some people knock on my door asking, 'Can you explain this to me?' When I see something not good, I call the police. It makes me feel good to help."

Recently, Reyna participated in the workshop "Growing with Love," where she learned how to avoid letting stress interfere with her role as a mother. The workshop strengthened her time-management skills and allowed her to be more involved in her children's lives. She was inspired to help other parents in the community do the same.

"We have a big problem in our community," says Reyna. "I see (that) my

neighbors are very busy and their kids are staying home alone. For me that's not good because if you have children and you leave them alone for three, four, five, six, seven hours, it's no good. That's not a family. That's a disaster."

In response, Reyna organized a meeting with neighborhood parents and talked with them about how important it is to spend more time with their children. She has made available a list of time-management techniques which she hopes might help the community to maintain the family unity.

Reyna is also leading the charge for a new park in her neighborhood. A friend has promised her a meeting with

Mayor Thomas Menino, and she is hoping that her efforts will bear fruit. Meanwhile she helps take care of neighborhood children who often fill her home when their parents are at work.

Though Reyna plans to continue her community organizing and advocacy work, she still dreams of pursuing a medical career. "Now its very important for me to learn good English because I want to go to college. I want to be a nurse." She

has applied to an Associate degree program at Bunker Hill Community College. Meanwhile, she continues to bring her own form of medicine to the community and its children.

"Reyna's enthusiasm for life and her eagerness to learn has spilled over to other women at the agency. We plant the seed and the person makes the seed grow, and Reyna has done that. She just doesn't see things; she takes over and does them. And that motivates students in an excellent way."

**-Felisa White
MUA Program Coordinator**



Photo: Aaron McElroy

Reyna Tejada attending the workshop "Despierta" with two co-participants.

English for New Bostonians (ENB) is a public-private-community solution initiated by the Mayor's Office of New Bostonians committed to expanding the city's long-term capacity to meet the demand for English classes. ENB increases seats in ESOL programs across the city, supports innovation in the field to reach learners at home and at work, and helps to heighten awareness about immigrant and language issues among the public, businesses, funders and all levels of government.

Learn more about ENB:

Mayor's Office of New Bostonians: 617-635-2980, cheng.tam@cityofboston.gov

Boston Adult Literacy Fund: 617-482-3336, balf@balf.net

Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition: 617-350-5480 x 203, cgreen@miracoalition.org