



Anyone who has ever posted a want ad

for a K-12 world language teacher can sympathize with this story: As the chairperson of World Languages for a public school district on Long Island, I have submitted countless want ads to the *New York Times*, sent postings to our national ListSers: FLTeach and Nandutí, and also contacted language-specific organizations such as the AATs in search of teachers. I have called directors of teacher education programs at local colleges like New York University and C.W. Post. I have designed eye-catching mini-posters for display on job boards at local, regional and national conferences. I have even been known to approach speakers of Spanish, French, Italian and Chinese in the street with the plaintive refrain: “Have you ever thought about going into education?” Still, after all these efforts to solicit resumes, I am rewarded with

a dozen or so — no match for the hundreds of CVs that pour in for my colleagues in Social Studies or English.

What to do? How can we encourage people to join our ranks and become speakers, lovers and — eventually — teachers of world languages? In my school district, we have turned to the children. Ah, the children — the hope for the future!

Being a patient lot, we have started planting the seeds early and begun talking to our students at all levels about a future in language education. We do this informally once we recognize in certain students that spark, that flair, that passion for language that first inspired many of us to seek a life of teaching. We take note of those inspired students — the ones who look for extra reading, enjoy conjugating verbs and get a kick out of using the

subjunctive mood in essays or oral presentations. We make lists of those students who know more about Latin music than we do, who have been to Molière plays on the weekends, who have memorized Italian poetry on their own, or who have gone to Chinatown on Friday nights just to hang out and talk to native Chinese speakers. We recognize in these students something of ourselves at their age — a passion for language and culture.

We approach these miraculous students to share our own life stories and outline the trajectories that brought us into teaching languages. We gently suggest that the student would be a really wonderful teacher of Spanish, French, Italian, or Chinese. Some students react with instant rejection: “A teacher? No way! Teachers... (they usually finish the sentence with something negative)...

Harvesting Help

Lori Langer de Ramírez shares her school district's way of inspiring students to not only love languages but also teach them

don't get any respect; don't get paid enough; work too hard; don't have any fun!" Those that don't respond negatively often look at us quizzically and ask, "Really? You think I could teach?" It's at this point that we go in for the hard sell: "Teaching is..." (we usually finish the sentence with something positive) "...exhilarating; rewarding; fun." We often end the speech with the most enticing perk of all: "AND (pause for emphasis) we get summers OFF!"

Aside from simply suggesting — and then selling — the idea of a life in education to students, we do other things in our district to inspire students to find their path to world language education. We have been encouraging more and more students to double-up (or triple-up!) in language. Why not? The science student doubles up by taking chemistry and physics together. The math student might do a trigonometry class alongside a course in statistics. Art students will typically have studio art running concurrently with a history of art class. Our "language majors" have started to see the possibility of studying Spanish and

French — together. Danielle, one of our most passionate language students (see her essay next page) is taking Spanish, French and Italian — and achieving A+ in all of them, I might add! She took intensive Chinese classes through the China Institute this summer and plans to "pick up" Arabic in college. Now THAT is a language student!

In order to allow for "majoring" in language in the high school years, we have also been more flexible in allowing students to skip over beginning level classes. For example, our Spanish students who have studied for five years and want to add Italian do not need to start with Italian 1. We often place them in Italian 2 — or even Italian 3 — allowing them to reach higher-level classes in their time in high school. These students study the missing material over the summer and are monitored during the first weeks of their new language. Overall, they have fared very well and the comparison between their two languages is both exciting and helpful for them.

In my decade of chairing a department,

our planting, sowing and harvesting of student/teachers of languages has yielded only one mature and fruit-bearing "plant."

Katherine, a former student from two of my upper-level Spanish classes, contacted me from college one year. I was thrilled to hear that she had decided to major in Spanish. I was amazed and flattered to hear that she wanted to "follow in my footsteps" and become a Spanish teacher! I am convinced that it is not an angel getting wings, but rather a young adult deciding to enter the teaching ranks, that triggers a bell ringing in heaven. I know I heard chimes the day that Katherine told me that she had entered a teacher-training program.

Katherine went on to study Spanish, live in Chile for a semester, and get a job teaching Spanish in the same room in which she herself took HS Spanish (read Katherine's story on page 25). She is now one of our brightest and most talented teachers. It only took us 11 years for her to mature to full "planthood." We're all glad we planted the seeds early! Now we are patiently waiting for our next crop.



Danielle's "A-ha" Moment

"Next person in line, please step down." The ticket agent sighed into the loudspeaker for probably the 300th time that day. It was only 7:45 AM on the first Monday of the summer, and tempers were already running high at LaGuardia Airport. I found myself getting annoyed in spite of myself; my family had been planning this trip to Disney World for four months, but it didn't even look like we'd get on our 9:00AM flight if the line continued to creep forward at this sluggish pace. The people in front of us moved a whole inch forward; I kicked my bag in frustration and then plopped down on top of my lumpy luggage. We were going to be here for a while. I started to read the various signs in the airport and was delighted to see that these signs were also in Spanish. I amused myself by translating from Spanish to English for quite some time.

I was in the middle of reading about the maximum weight of carry-on luggage when I heard the familiar crackle of the microphone being turned on. "Does anyone here speak Spanish?" inquired the ticket agent. I immediately straightened up from my slouched position. Did I speak Spanish? Is the sky blue? I was ready to spring up and proclaim at the top of my lungs that yes, I spoke Spanish when I suddenly became aware of my surroundings. I grew self-conscious and remained quiet. I had just completed tenth grade, and while I had achieved a certain level of proficiency after five years of Spanish class, by no means would I call myself fluent. I figured that there had to be at least one real Spanish speaker in on that insufferable line who had grown up speaking Spanish or who had at least received a more formal education in the language than I had. I slouched back down again, dreaming of the day when I would proudly be able to say I was fluent.

After a long and silent pause, the exasperated ticket agent voiced her question once more. At this point, my mom, aunt and sister started nudging me and making a commotion. "D! You speak Spanish! Go on up there!" I began to blush furiously. Why were they doing this to me? I couldn't just go up there and stupidly explain to the woman that I had learned Spanish in school. Maybe I was getting what I deserved, as I had been driving my family crazy with my obsession with the Spanish language for the past two years. I would sing Spanish songs at the top of my lungs, only to sing even louder when asked by my family to either sing in English or to translate. I would randomly start speaking in Spanish to my mom, who had only taken two years of Spanish in high school, and ask her if she could understand me. Then, there was the "r" rolling. I would constantly roll my "Rs" at the most inappropriate times — during dinner, while watching TV and in the car on the way to school — all in order to train my mouth to adopt a Spanish accent. I had put them through all of that torture, but what did I have to show for it?

My legs felt like lead as I made my way to the check-in counter, passing the different customers on line, who regarded me with mixed expressions of astonishment and gratitude. When I arrived face-to-face with the ticket agent, she looked at me with utter disbelief. "You mean to tell me that you speak Spanish?" she questioned, incredulously looking me up and down, her eyes fixated on my face — free of the creases and crinkles that come with age. I simply nodded, uncertain myself if I would completely butcher the language. After a few seconds of letting the shock sink in, she decided that I was acceptable for the task at hand. She nodded her head at a wide-eyed man who was standing next to the desk. "This man doesn't speak any English," she explained to me. "I need you to tell him that he needs to bring his bags to that large machine over there because they're over the weight limit." She paused and then added, "Do you think you can handle that?"

I approached the man, desperately hoping that he would be able to understand me despite my gringa accent. I then began to explain to him in Spanish what he needed to do. He seemed to be in deep thought and did not answer for a couple of seconds, and I proceeded to rack my brains as I searched for a better way to explain. All of a sudden, the man smiled. He responded in rapid Spanish, so fast that he threw me off guard for a second. "That machine over there?" he asked. I nodded, smiling as my eyes darted over to the ticket agent. Her mouth was now a gaping black hole, her eyes wide with astonishment. I am sure that her expression of disbelief matched my own. He had understood me!

After the man had thanked me and walked away, I was in a state of euphoria. As I triumphantly walked back to my place on line, a few onlookers offered me encouraging smiles. When I got to my aunt, mom and sister, I was greeted with hugs and hurrahs as they exclaimed, "WAY TO GO, D!"

To any other person, these two minutes might have been mildly satisfying at most and thus soon forgotten. But for me, this fleeting moment has been etched into my mind ever since. In fact, more than a year later, I remember my trip to Disney not for the encounters with Mickey and Minnie Mouse (although I do love those guys), but as a trip during which I experienced one of the proudest and most rewarding moments of my life. I do not think that the man I helped will ever know what an impact he had on my life; in fact, he never even knew my name. What I do know is from that day on, I realized that I wanted to dedicate my life to continuing my study of language and communicating in order to help others. While I only showed this man where to put his luggage, he showed me where my life should go.

Danielle Cotter
Senior, Herricks High School



Llamas on the Inca Trail near Machu Picchu, Peru

Inspiring Katherine

It can take a lifetime for a person to find their niche in life.

Fortunately, I knew mine by the age of eight. After spending six short days in South America with my parents as we brought home my newly adopted brother, I felt a shift in my life, detectable even at such a young age. Being touched so personally by Latino culture, I was inspired and intrigued to know and learn more, even though at that time I may not have been able to put those feelings into words.

It is because of my experience in the Herricks Public Schools and later my experience at American University that I was finally able to take ownership over the deep identification with the Hispanic community that I felt but could not express. Being so carefully cultivated by my World Language teachers, I quickly learned just how much more a language is, aside from the words that comprise it.

My education was supplemented richly and regularly with authentic cultural elements. The implementation of debates, art, communicative activities, *objetos culturales*, history, regional food, authentic documents, and music (just to name a few approaches) was essential to inspiring in me a life-long pursuit of foreign languages. The ability to travel out of the country without ever leaving the classroom was remarkable and the deciding factor in motivating me to teach a World Language. I wanted the opportunity to inspire in others the same sense of global community through language that I had experienced. Through authenticity, instead of textbooks, my teachers and professors helped me to express a passion that without which, I could not emote on my own.

I have made a full circle journey, returning to my own high school to teach Spanish. When I see my students everyday, it is courtesy of my teachers that I carry with me more than just vocabulary lists and verb

conjugations; each day I bring years of traveling experience, both literal and metaphorical. My knowledge base as a life-long student of Spanish as well as a Spanish teacher is owed completely to richness of my past experiences in the World Language classroom.

Now that I am teaching, I have a new respect for the added time and effort it takes to just put a great lesson plan into motion. Students and teachers alike are ready to go home at 3pm. However, for myself, it was a teacher taking the time to lend that great García Márquez novel, to photocopy an interesting article from a Spanish newspaper or magazine, or to share her new Maná CD that gave me that extra push to delve deeper into my study of Spanish. It was offering me opportunities to drive my own cultural understanding both inside and outside of the classroom that keep me sustained by a constant flow of new and exciting background related to my chosen World Language. Most of all, it was the gift of my teachers' extra time and thought to consider my strengths and interests that motivated me to go into teaching. Someone cared enough to help me in the pursuit of my greatest interest, an interest that I had but couldn't understand on my own. For that I felt a sense of duty to do the same for someone else. It also should not go without mentioning that my job is to talk and share my passion with young and impressionable minds... all day! How many other professions can say that? And every so often I am able to see that "oh so familiar" spark of interest in the eyes of a student, or hear another murmur my favorite sentence, "I never knew that!" By following the examples of my teachers and my present-day colleagues, I am able to understand and experience the satisfaction of giving that motivated language student a means by which to nourish and maintain their interest.

Katherine Kirschner
Spanish Teacher, Herricks High School

Lori Langer de Ramírez, Ed.D. is the chair of ESL and World Languages for Herricks Public Schools in New York. A wealth of teacher resources are available for download at her website: www.miscositas.com. ❧