

## Communication: It's All in the Interpretation

Sometimes life delivers just what you need, even if you don't know you need it. It happened that way for Sayrel Garcia-Zuniga, a Community Health Worker (CHW) with United Way of Henry County-Martinsville.

Born in Patrick County and raised in Henry County, Garcia-Zuniga is the child of parents who came to the United States from Mexico before her birth. She had originally intended to become a nurse after graduating from Bassett High School in 2017. But once enrolled at Radford University she decided that nursing was "not for me" and switched her major to social services. Although not in the medical field, social work was still helping people, she reasoned, and she felt she had found her niche.

Thanks to the ACE program at BHS, Garcia-Zuniga graduated with her bachelor's degree in three years instead of four, having earned an associate degree from Patrick & Henry Community College along with her high school diploma. An internship at Piedmont Community Services broadened and deepened her understanding of just what human services means, and then she landed what she calls her first "big girl job" with the Department of Social Services in Martinsville, working in the foster care department for over a year.

"In that same year I became a mom. I learned so much about this community – just working there opened my eyes. It taught me how to be more emphatic with people. It showed me that there are two sides to every story and that we should be open-minded, don't be biased."

But the job could be demanding and stressful, she said. "Social work burnout is true. It's real. I had child of my own that I had to raise, and I wanted to save my energy for my child at home." So, she started looking around for something different, and stumbled on the community health worker job ad.

"Oh wow, a job for bilinguals. I already have that skill," she thought. She hesitated at the title of job, Community Health Worker, because she had never worked in health field but then decided to give it a try. She believes her community service and contacts through DSS helped her get the job. That first job opened so many doors, she said, and she still maintains connections and refers clients back to that agency because of their many resources.

Once on staff with United Way, an opportunity arose to interpret in her capacity as a CHW for the Henry-Martinsville Health Department (HMHD).

"Interpreting is something I'd never thought about," she said. "As the child of two LEP (low-English proficiency) parents, I was always the interpreter for them - in conversing with non-Spanish speakers and reading and completing documents. I've been doing this my whole life, but to get paid to do it is something completely different!"

Garcia-Zuniga explained that she had to learn Spanish because that's what was spoken at home and she had to learn English because that's what was spoken at school. Even so, she took Spanish in high school to increase her proficiency and because speaking a language casually may not always be technically 'correct.'

*Interpreter, p. 2*

A translator is not the same thing as an interpreter, she points out. A translator might paraphrase, but interpreting uses the same tone as was used when the message was originally delivered. An interpreter must also share everything that is said and should understand cultural differences.

As a certified medical interpreter, the work that Garcia-Zuniga does for HMHD is with the family planning department. Every Tuesday between 9 a.m. and 4:30 p.m., she works with health department staff and public health nurses to serve non-English speaking clients, or those with limited understanding of English. She walks them through the whole appointment from intake until they are discharged.

Among the many things Garcia-Zuniga does for clients is making and canceling appointments. "Something so simple is so hard when you don't know the language. It is gratifying to see the relief on somebody's face when they know they have resources and someone who understands available."

It is not only the clients who benefit from her services. The public health nurses at the health department have found that the appointments go much more smoothly when clients and patients understand what is happening and why. With an increasing local Hispanic population, being able to communicate is invaluable, they say.

Garcia-Zuniga credits her natural drive to work with individuals for why she believes being a CHW is a good fit. "I can reach out and communicate with you without judging you. I'm human just like you are," she said, showing her 'Only Human' tattoo on her forearm. "Without empathy a lot is miscommunicated. I want to be able to help just by being there," she says.

Where will the future take this 24-year old?

"Wherever life goes, don't stress it. Whatever it is, we'll figure it out."

It's worked for her so far.

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