

Mario Sierra Garcia:

"I was really hungry to learn the language, and the people at Literacy Network helped me do that." *Homework:*



"Learning English is hard for people. I've had the privilege of learning the language, and I feel a responsibility to use it as a tool to help people in the immigrant community," says Mario Sierra Garcia, program director for the Madison non-profit organization, Centro Hispano.

Mario immigrated from Guatemala in 2003 with a clear idea of what he wanted to do with his life. "Education was my first goal when I came to the United States. I wanted to finish my education at the UW-Madison. Then, I hoped to find meaningful work where I could go and feel excited about the work I was doing. English was essential to what I wanted to do.

"I was looking for a place to learn English that didn't cost money because I didn't have money," he adds.

Fortunately, friends told him about the Literacy Network, where language services are provided free of charge. Mario enrolled in classes and attended tutoring sessions in the evenings at the Literacy Network, but he had to be placed on a waiting list to be matched with his own tutor. Then, as now, the number of learners outstripped the number of volunteer tutors available to teach them. Eventually he was matched with Andrea.

"Andrea was the perfect match for me because she was really kind and patient, but she would push me. She wasn't afraid to tell me my mistakes, and that's what I really wanted. She understood my goals and had a clear picture of what I wanted to accomplish."

Mario made remarkable progress over the following months. "I was really hungry to learn the language, and the people at Literacy Network helped me do that," he says.

Soon, he was taking classes at Madison College, and continued to work with Andrea to prepare for the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), which the UW-Madison requires of most foreign applicants.

"I remember I was really scared to take that test," says Mario. "My friends told me it was really hard, and I worked a lot to prepare for it. But when I took it, I didn't think it was that hard--maybe because I was ready."

A good score on the TOEFL, combined with a high GPA at Madison College, qualified Mario for admittance to the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Mario began working at Centro Hispano, where he oversees educational programs in five middle schools and three high schools in Madison. "Our goal is to support the academic learning experience of Latino kids in the school district," he notes. "We have tutors for kids who need extra help or who just have some questions about their homework. We also have a lot of cultural enrichment activities so the kids can learn more about their history and their culture. We want to help them develop a sense of identity in a world where they navigate two cultures and two languages."

Mario says, "I want to create programs that really help students and their families achieve success. I'd like to see Latino youth thriving in the community and make it to college."



Literacy Network
Improving Lives Through Literacy

Mario tells his story in video at www.litnetwork.org

Literacy Network teaches reading, writing and speaking skills to adults and families so they can achieve financial independence, good health and greater involvement in community life. All programs are free of charge.

Photo and Video: Narayan Mahon