NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Teacher uses own experience to help immigrants improve their lives

Sr. Camille D'Arienzo | Nov. 12, 2013 Conversations with Sr. Camille

Raul Andrade, 49, regularly travels from his home in the Sunnyside neighborhood of Queens, N.Y., to the Fort Greene section of Brooklyn. Arriving at the Convent of Mercy, headquarters of Mercy Home, an agency that cares for developmentally disabled adults, he walks through the enclosed garden to a two-story building at its far end. That is the Dorothy Bennett Mercy Center (DBMC), which offers after-school help for public school children, mostly immigrants, and an array of services for adults.

Raul is worlds away from Ibarra, a small town in Ecuador he left in 1983 when he was just 19. Ibarra is where he grew up, the oldest of five sons whose father was a teacher and whose mother stayed at home to care for the family.

***Sr. Camille*: Raul, what stands out from your memories of your parents?**

Andrade: I don't know how my mother was able to handle five boys. Both my parents showed me how to be respectful and tolerant to everybody.

You are adept at extending that same respect to those small-business owners for whom you provide technical support. Their employees are mostly new immigrants with limited resources and skills. Respecting people who come with few skills, without English, and often without resources is an important Christian value. Did someone else reinforce what you learned from your parents?

When I arrived in New York with a year of college behind me, I lived for a while with my uncle, Jaime Andrade. His values mirrored those of the family I left behind. My uncle taught me that if somebody asks you for a favor and you are able to do it, you should oblige without having to be repaid for the favor.

What else impressed you about him?

Well, he came to this country about 50 years ago and for about 40 years worked in a contemporary art gallery. During the time I lived with him, I learned to appreciate art.

I learned to value him, as well. I learned he helped many struggling artists, especially those who came from Latin America. He himself has a large collection of paintings and Pre-Columbian art. Even now that he is retired, he remains very involved in the art world and with his private collection.

Did your uncle introduce you to any prominent artists?

I do remember meeting Andy Warhol, although at the time, I didn't realize how well-known he was.

You certainly follow your uncle's example as the instructor of adult education at the DBMC for almost 10 years. You may not introduce them to prominent people, but you have offered keys to successful employment to many by helping them master the skills of our computer-driven age. What can you say about your students?

The majority of students that come to the DBMC are immigrants from Latin America who for different reasons have left their homeland to make the United States of America their new home, and they want to improve their way of life by getting a better job. In many places, the minimum requirement is to have a GED diploma and know how to use a computer. Every time one of our students is able to achieve this dream, all the people who work at the DBMC share in that accomplishment.

Your co-workers praise you as an excellent teacher. They say you move between English and Spanish with great ease. Does some of this come from being an immigrant yourself?

I think so. I remember well how hard it was to hold a day job and go to school at night. Because of that, I can be understanding to those who come to class late. I don't watch the clock when students need extra help.

Do you offer them any particular practical advice?

Besides offering the subjects for acquiring computer skills and a GED, I always try to teach them that they have to get involved with the community, that they have to be informed of the things going on at the political level. That's the only way their voices will be heard.

What is your general impression of your students?

I'm inspired by the sacrifices they make. Many of them are parents who work more than 10 hours a day, often at hard physical labor. Still they come to class because they know that education is a key to a better future for their families.

Where did you learn to appreciate your Catholic faith?

My parents are Catholic, and in Ecuador, religion has always been an important part of most families. From a very young age, I remember going to church with my mother and her aunts, but now that I'm older I have learned to be closer to my religion.

Did you regularly attend church in Ecuador?

There were a couple of churches I used to go to in Ecuador. One was called Iglesia La Merced in my Ibarra and then later, when my father was transferred at his job to his hometown, Otavalo, we went to a church called San Luis.

Where do you worship now?

Saint Sebastian R.C. in Woodside, Queens.

Can you name differences from what you experienced as a child and what you know as an adult?

As children, we follow the teachings of our mentors, parents and superiors. A lot of times, we just follow what we are told. I think the way I was taught religion was just memorizing prayers and reading some passages from the Bible. We were not to commit sins and were to be afraid of God if we did something bad, but with time and through life experience, I have learned to get closer to God through a spiritual growth, and not only because I

was told to relate in some particular way.

What about Catholicism is most important to you and why?

I believe that a life without religious teachings is an empty life. We need to have our beliefs to improve ourselves and have hope for a better life and a peaceful coexistence with everyone. This is something all of humanity needs.

What more do you want from our church?

Its leaders will have to put more attention to the younger generations. They are the future, and the teachings have to be more in tune with them. I think using technology more effectively would be helpful, but at the same time, not forgetting the human touch.

Do you have a favorite Scripture passage?

Hebrews 11:6 [1]: "And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him."

What is your impression of Pope Francis?

From the moment he showed up at the windows at the Vatican and asked for the people to pray for him, I saw qualities of a person dedicated to a life for God.

Does he inspire you to behave differently?

His message he delivered on Easter in which he appealed to us to reject what he called a "world divided by greed." He told us to pay attention to the poor and to lend them a hand. I think his teachings will make a difference for all attentive Catholics.

One of your co-workers thinks you would make a wonderful priest. Did you ever consider that vocation?

No. I believe being a priest requires a lot: personality, humanity, simplicity, humility and knowledge. These and many other qualities are not easy to hold together.

What are some of the blessings you experience in your current life?

Since I got to New York, I've felt its energy, and I fell in love with its beauty. I know a lot of people dislike this city, but just taking a walk in it makes me feel happy.

What would make you even happier?

I wish there could be more grants so that the center could offer more services, some for free.

Getting to know you convinces me of the wisdom of a compliment paid by one of your employers said, "When Raul walks into the center he brings a quiet, gentle, reassuring presence that exudes peace. No matter how busy he is, he's always ready to lend a helping hand, give advice or answer a question. He has a knack for understanding just what the student needs. What he offers is very important, but even more so is who he is."

Thank you, Raul.

[Mercy Sr. Camille D'Arienzo, broadcaster and author, narrates *Stories of Forgiveness*, a book about people whose experiences have caused them to consider the possibilities of extending or accepting forgiveness. The audiobook, renamed *Forgiveness: Stories of Redemption*, is available [2] from Now You Know Media.]

Editor's note: We can send you an email alert every time Sr. Camille's column, Conversations with Sr. Camille, is posted. Go to this page and follow directions: Email alert signup [3].

Source URL (retrieved on *10/13/2015 - 03:30*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/conversations-sr-camille/teacher-uses-own-experience-help-immigrants-get-ahead

Links:
[1] http://www.usccb.org/bible/hebrews/11/
[2] http://www.nowyouknowmedia.com/stories-of-forgiveness.html
[3] http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup