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Carmelina M. Cadena
Professional Interpreter

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From There to Here: My Mayan Journey and Life in America

Carmelina M. Cadena

Multilingual Interpreter & Translator

Available Languages:

Akateko/Popti/Qanjobal/Kiche/Qeqchi/Kaqchiquel/Ixil/Chuj/Awakateko/Achi/Chorti/Mam

Abstract: In this personal commentary, Carmelina tell how she fled Guatemala when a small child, walking the journey with her mother.

“Chi’tit yul’in nab’al’an, xa lak’oj, go’ox-go’ox xi xal yajan eb, chi kop’be yiban stzo’otz. Ko to ji’nin’oj, xa lak’oj, bej’kan masanil, ton ki’ba’el ko ba’!” (Akateko)

“I remember it; the urgency, the hurry, the sound of many feet pounding on the earth. Running, hurrying, leave everything behind. Hide, quickly, hide!” (English)

We were hiding under a huge rock, like in a cave, in the dark; I could smell the dampness of the earth. I remember hearing the bullets zing by. I saw the flash as they fired guns, heard the noise as bullets hit the house and the huge rocks nearby. We waited, hidden, waiting for them to move on, for the soldiers to leave. We were safe for the moment but we couldn’t stay, I was 5, or 6. We had to leave. We took only what we could carry. It was my mother, and I.

We walked away in the dark of night. We couldn’t risk being seen in the daytime. We walked for a long time, staying with kind, generous people we had never met before. We walked through the mountains, we crossed over rivers, and we stayed in different regions, with people who spoke different languages. I listened, I learned, I asked my mother what they were saying. We crossed borders and walked through Mexico. We crossed another river. I clung to my mother’s back. My mother couldn’t swim, she still can’t; but we crossed the river. In 1983, we made it to El Norte, to Arizona; we lived in an orange grove in a place named Chandler Heights, AZ. Then we went to work.

We couldn’t speak the language but we knew to get on the trucks. The trucks would take us to the fields. We picked tomatoes, cucumbers, and whatever other vegetables they needed us to pick. The trucks would take us back to where we had been picked up in the early morning. We would start there again the next day. I remember my first payday for thinning sugar beets on a farm in Rupert Idaho. I received a check for ten dollars. It was

an exciting day. We moved around a lot. We followed the crops. When we picked oranges, I could only reach the low ones because of my stature.

I went to school when I could. I hungered to learn. Usually I could only stay in school for two or three months at a time, then we had to move on. Sometimes we arrived at the next location at night; we would get up early the next morning to go to work. Reality was, if we didn't work, we didn't eat.

Eventually I had six months of schooling under my belt. With that, I was referred to as "la que habla mucho ingles"; the "one who speaks a lot of English". I learned English so I could interpret for my mom. I learned to count money because I liked money. By age eight, I was interpreting for my mother from our native language of Akateko to English. I was negotiating work for us. I was able to walk up to farmers houses to ask about work, to get the farmer and my mother to agree on our work and our pay. I remember so well the first deal that I brokered. I received my first pay as an interpreter; a six pack of canned Pepsi and a Payday candy bar. I was overjoyed. Even though my mother told me to save my sodas for later, by the time we were on our ride home I had already drunk two cans, because they were all mine.

I continued to go to school when I could. I went to many different schools. All along, my mother told me "Never forget where we come from. Never forget your language", so I didn't. People asked me to go places with them to interpret because they couldn't understand English, or Spanish. I also knew how to speak the languages that I learned working side by side with people that spoke other languages from my country. When I was young, I interpreted for free. As a teenager, I was paid a Burger King sandwich for my skills. I loved BK sandwiches, but one lady never offered to get me fries or a soda, just the sandwich. I was a child; maybe she thought I didn't need the fries and drink. But sometimes I thought she was mean because she only gave me the sandwich, after all the work I did for her wherever she took me to interpret.

Eventually I graduated from high school in Florida. Then I decided it was time to further my education and I went to school to study dental hygiene. That's when I found out I needed to present proof of United States residency. Sadly, I didn't have that document and I had to drop out of the program.

I continued to help people who asked me to go with them for different appointments and to different places. In 2002, I obtained my United States residency, which changed everything for me. With that, I was able to help in capacities that I couldn't before. I went to court with a friend who needed an interpreter for our native language Akateko. The court only provided interpreters for Spanish; they didn't know much about all our indigenous languages. One day in court, a judge said to me, "Where have you been? We

need you and your language skills!”

This was the beginning of my professional career in interpreting. I worked with an agency, traveling around Florida and the United States to court rooms, medical appointments and schools. I recognized the needs of my people and realized my unique ability to help them. But my people, the Guatemalan Maya, come from a part of the world that is rugged and mountainous. Villages are separated by geographic barriers, mountains, valleys, rivers, and gorges. I was encouraged to learn about the history of my people and the tragic events that led to the Diaspora of the Guatemalan Maya. I learned a lot more about the armed conflict that took place in the 1980's and forced my family to leave our village. I learned why we were not the only ones fleeing from Guatemala then. I learned about the things that I didn't understand when I was young. I eventually returned to my country to see it anew. As an adult, I walked the path that we had had taken so many years prior. I studied about my own people, my own country, and my own history. There are 22 recognized indigenous languages in Guatemala and there are many dialects of each of those languages. It is difficult and often impossible to understand each other. It is also difficult to find interpreters for these languages. As more people have immigrated to the United States, the need for interpreters has grown.

Between 2002 and 2010, as I spent more time in the courtroom, I recognized the need for interpreters of indigenous languages. I was asked many times if I knew anyone who spoke Mam, or K'iche. I would think to myself “I am but one person and I do not speak all of these languages”. It was then that I realized that I did know people who could speak those languages and many more languages.

The Universe guides my path and led me to create an organization to help my people from Guatemala. I have been gifted with skills that I strive to improve daily. I began with what was gifted to me and as I grow, I learn, and more is given to me; more opportunities and more responsibilities. I founded Mayainterpreters.com. I was able to locate and enlist the help of interpreters for the needs of the courtroom by day and the hospitals and police stations by night.

As I travel around the world, I have been able to recruit and train interpreters from other lands. Our team is now able to help with interpretations and translations for indigenous languages from Guatemala and Mexico as well as a few other languages. We travel to courtrooms across the United States. We assist with immigration issues and criminal issues. We assist with medical consultations and emergencies. We help in educational institutions. Sometimes we are physically present, other times we are there telephonically or via video.

I have been invited to speak at different events. I speak to organizations of

interpreters, I speak at universities and at conferences; I receive invitations to speak on radio and on television. I have attended conferences at the UN. I speak to raise awareness about my people and our culture. I speak to stand up for our rights. I speak to let others know the truth, that the Maya people are not extinct. I speak about our journey from my country. I speak and work with my Mayan brothers and sisters; I want them to know they are important. I attend conferences to learn from other professionals about their struggles and successes with indigenous languages from around the world. Every day brings new adventures to our team as we continue to work close to home, throughout the United States and Mexico, into Central America, and across the Atlantic into Europe.



Years later I retraced the path taken by my mother and I, Pa'am to Jacaltenango