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When Skills and Knowledge are Not Enough

Nitz' Ama'y

Abstract: Although the author received his GED diploma and has taken courses to be able to interpret from native K'iche' language to the English language; he has been unable to work as an interpreter due to the lack of the social security number.

Sib'alaj kimaltyoxij, sib'alaj kinkikotik rumal jun q'et tz'ib'anik, juntaq tzij xinya' apanoq chawe.

I'm very pleased, I am very happy for the opportunity you gave me to share these lines, to share this word with you!

Although I received my GED diploma and have taken courses to be able to interpret from my native K'iche' language to the English language; I have not been able to work as an interpreter due to the lack of the social security number.

I arrived in this great country in August 2000; I started to go to adult school to learn the language because to succeed in the United States you must first learn the English language. And to go to school I had to use a bicycle that my uncle gave me because I did not have money to buy a car. In the summer time, it was perfect to go to school by bicycle but in the winter, it was the most difficult since sometimes the temperature reached below zero. I wanted to succeed and learn part of the culture of this great nation.

After a lot of effort and hours of English grammar studies, finally after 3 years I was able to have a conversation in English with the classroom teachers. Joan was my advanced level English teacher. She suggested GED classes because she considered me ready. So I started going to classes to finish my next goal.

Mike was an instructor in GED classes and was very pleased to know that I started taking classes. I became friends with him because he was fascinated by the Mayan culture. He was learning a bit about the K'iche' language because my native language's grammar is similar to the English language. The instructor was a very good teacher because he helped me a lot with the five courses. I remember that every time I had difficulties learning algebra or writing, he told me: "if you could cross rivers, desert and many miles on the way to the United States, why can't do this sitting at a desk studying a book!" Finally, I got my GED in 2004; it was a great joy because I acquired my diploma in Nebraska, United States.

As time passed, I had the opportunity to attend some basic classes on interpreters from the Mayan languages to English at the University of Creighton Nebraska. This course was attended by young Mayans who came from different parts of the United States with the objective that each one could help in their community by interpreting for people in clinics, hospitals or other institutions that needed interpreters.

This course was quite good because they taught me the basic tools to be able to interpret from my K'iche' language to English or Spanish. And after long hours of study I felt very proud, very excited that I could finally help those who needed an interpreter of my language, especially in cities like Omaha, Lincoln, Grand Island and other towns around, where there are many people who speak K'iche' and do not speak English, and some do not speak Spanish well either.

Well after all, I wanted to help those who need an interpreter; I decided to go to Saint Francis Medical Center to offer my skills. The person who attended me was very kind and interested in my profession, she began to talk about the procedures I had to follow to be able to fulfill the requirements and she gave me an application for the job. I started to fill the application with some enthusiasm and nervousness at the same time. But I could not complete the application, because they asked me for the social security number and unfortunately, I do not have that number. I dared to ask the lady who gave me the application, what could I do in this case because I do not have social security? She could not do anything about it; to work in this institution you must have a social security number and an ID. I felt sad and disappointed; I have the necessary tools to be an interpreter of the K'iche' language but with my legal status I can't do anything. The only thing I have been able to do is voluntarily help some people or friends when they ask me to interpret for them in their doctor appointments.

In other occasions, for example, an immigration lawyer had a client who spoke only K'iche' and needed an interpreter and I had the honor of helping her over the phone. She even asked me if I could go help the person in his appointment with the immigration judge, I said no, because I'm afraid to enter an immigration court with my immigration status.