

People in the SJ: Carlos Ruiz

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Statesman Journal

April 11, 2010

Carlos Ruiz's first memory of America looms large in his childhood.

He stood outside Walker Middle School looking up at the building towering in front of him.

The 12-year-old had moved to the United States from a village in Mexico where the only school had four rooms and didn't go past the sixth grade.

"Such an enormous building," he thought.

His mother, Bertha, left Ruiz and his sister at the doorstep so she could make her 7:30 a.m. shift at a cannery.

She and her husband, Elias, already moved thousands of miles for her kids to have this opportunity, but the children would have to take the final steps themselves.

"I was just overwhelmed," Ruiz said.

His sister started to cry.

It was sink or swim, run or fall. Ruiz not only ran, he blazed a trail that changed the future of his family forever. In one generation, the Ruiz children catapulted past their parents' second-grade education to earn college degrees.

Immersion in English

On that first day, the Ruiz children made their way to the office where staff scrambled for someone who spoke Spanish. They enrolled in the Newcomer's Center, which was a mix of students from around the world. The teachers usually didn't speak the children's native language so the students learned through immersion.

Phil Decker remembers Carlos from these first few years.



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Carlos Ruiz teaches his Spanish II class at West Salem High School.

Carlos Ruiz

Hometown: Las Zarquillas in rural Michoacan, Mexico

Parents: Bertha and Elias Ruiz

Siblings: Laura Ruiz, 29, works for Salem Clinic as a medical assistant; Esthela Ruiz, 28, works as a dental assistant in Friendship Dental; Elias Ruiz, 24, Western Oregon University graduate; Maria Ruiz, 21, senior at Willamette University; Maria G. Ruiz, 19, sophomore at the University of Portland.

Extended family: Ruiz claims around 50 first cousins in Salem. He doesn't know the exact number, he said, but if he had a few minutes he could list them all by name.

Records: He still holds the record at McKay High School for the fastest 5K run at 15.51 minutes and fastest 3K run at 8.50 minutes.

Early memory in America: Fellow students picking up utensils in cooking class and asking what the Spanish word was for each. One of those former students now teaches with him at West Salem High School.

Occupation: Teaches Spanish at West Salem High School and coaches JV soccer. Someday he hopes to play a role in shaping education policy.

Decker, now principal at Four Corners Elementary, taught Carlos at Waldo Middle School the following year.

Running schedule: He runs between 40 and 50 miles per week at 6.4 minutes per mile.

"I remember Ruiz as a very bright boy, tall, skinny little thing," he said.

He was quiet, Decker said, but thoughtful and respectful. Ruiz made friends easily with the other international students.

"He is one of those students who has always stuck out in my mind," Decker said.

Ruiz spent summers working in the fields picking strawberries, cherries and blueberries to earn money for clothes, athletic fees and other expenses.

He worked just as hard in the classroom.

After two years of building his English word by word, Ruiz learned enough to take college prep classes as a freshman at McKay High School.

He also excelled in track, something Decker inspired.

Ruiz went on to break three school records. He still holds the fastest 5K time of 15.51 minutes and the fastest 3K of 8.50 minutes.

Athletics helped smooth his transition, Ruiz said.

But it wasn't until his cousin enrolled in a four-year university that he started to question his future.

His parents worked in factories and fields to support Ruiz and his five siblings. Although they never went beyond the second grade, his parents supported their children in pursuing every opportunity available.

It was his cousin, though, who supplied the catalyst.

"I could have easily said, 'Psssh, I'm not going to college,'" he said.

"She kind of paved the way for all of us."

Ruiz went on to graduate from Willamette University and get his masters in teaching from George Fox.

Ruiz could have been anything he wanted, Decker reflected, but he choose teaching.

It was a way to give back, Ruiz said, something else he learned from his parents.

Despite their modest income, the couple gives away food, blankets, pillows and money to relatives and even strangers who have just arrived to the United States. They help people set up mail and find jobs.

Life makes full circle

Now Ruiz teaches Spanish at West Salem High School about three miles away from his first experience in an American classroom.

At 26 he doesn't look much older than his students, but his clothes set him apart. He sports khaki slacks, a white-collared shirt and a navy blueV-neck sweater.

"Escucha!" he tells his Spanish II students.

He gives clues in Spanish as students hold red and blue chips, eagerly trying to find the corresponding bingo tile ("Listen!"). Some cheer. Others groan.

Ruiz understands language skills don't all come from a book. He remembers songs, games and other interactive methods his teachers used to help him learn English.

"I still remember those songs," he said.

Now he teaches Spanish using those same methods, including playing Spanish-language music videos from YouTube.

"They really like the music," he said, "you see heads nodding. It's a really unique way to target kids."

And it works.

"I really like him as a teacher," said Spanish II student Erika Oliva.

The games, the songs and interactive stuff make it easier to learn, she said.

Plus, he acts everything out: swinging his arms to show running, fanning himself to show hot and showing his ears to listen. It all comes from those first days in his classrooms when his teachers didn't speak Spanish. They had to use cues to teach meaning.

In touch with his roots

Ruiz has roots in Salem and ones that extend farther into rural Michoacan, Mexico, where he grew up.

Remembering both is essential.

"I think of where we came from and where we've gone," he said.

Ruiz frequently visits the small town with his family during Christmas break. His hometown, Las Zarquillas, is about the size of Mount Angel and installed electricity lines only within the past two decades.

His father came to the United States about 30 years ago to work and then sent for his family about 15 years later.

The couple work factory jobs to support the family and give them opportunities they never had.

"They never wanted us to end up working in a place like this," Ruiz translated for his parents recently during their dinner break at Norpac Foods in Salem.

His mom proudly wears a red Willamette University sweatshirt along with her hair net and ear plugs.

But the couple never guessed how far their kids would go.

"I thought it would be a big accomplishment to learn a second language," his mom said, "but to make it to the university. I have no words."

Carlos in particular, they said, paved the way for his siblings because he was the first to go to a university.

They described him as a good-hearted person who has worked hard since he was little.

But Ruiz said it's all because of them.

They work so hard to make sure we had food on the table and a better life, Ruiz said.

"It's my responsibility to take full advantage of these opportunities.

"I make sure they know it's because of them I am where I am."

This humility is often what people remember about the 26-year-old.

His sister Maria J. Ruiz said that's what she admires most about her brother.

"With everything he achieved in school and cross country, he's always taken the advice from my parents to be humble no matter."

She knows without his help it would have been a lot harder to get where she is, she said between classes at Willamette University.

"I thought, if he can do it," she said, "we can, too."

But there's another side to Ruiz that most people don't see, she said. Most see him as this serious, quiet guy who keeps to himself.

"He's also a really fun guy," she said.

Ruiz is always up for an adventure, especially outdoors.

One summer he traveled around Mexico with two of his running buddies, including Olympian runner Nick Symmonds.

Ruiz also enjoys spending time with his extensive family around Salem.

Every Sunday the family gathers after church for stories, music, card playing and barbecue food.

There's always a birthday, anniversary or Quinceañera to attend with invite lists that swell to 200 people or more.

He enjoys catching up with his family weekly and showing them how much he appreciates them.

"I think a lot of it is culture, but also just the values my grandparents have taught," he said.

Other times he drives up to Portland to hang out with his girlfriend, eat Thai food and attend Spanish-language plays for fun.

But no matter his schedule, he always makes time to run anywhere from 40 to 50 miles per week.

It's his time to reflect on the day and enjoy the outdoors and his solitude.

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