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Taking Community Service Seriously

Margarita L. Krakusin

I have been privileged to offer community service in my two "homes": Grand Rapids, where I work; and Lansing, where I reside. This service has been providing translation and interpretation services from English to Spanish and fostering better and closer relations between the Hispanic and non-Hispanic communities in these areas.

For the past three years, I have conducted an intensive Spanish language training program for patrol officers of the Grand Rapids Police Department. The program, created and sponsored by the Hispanic Center of Grand Rapids, aims to enhance understanding between the police and the Spanish-speaking community, and, at the same time, help to ensure the officers' well-being during their official contacts with this community. In addition to language instruction, the police learn about cultural differences. For example, American police officers are trained to react immediately to nervous behavior when an individual is stopped and questioned. However, in most Spanish-speaking cultures, the police are traditionally viewed as an oppressive arm of the government, to be feared and avoided at all costs. Therefore, a Hispanic-American may react with nervousness when approached by a police officer. Knowing this cultural difference allows police officers to conduct their interviews more effectively.

In Lansing and East Lansing, I have translated into Spanish medical pamphlets put out by the various clinical departments of Michigan State University and the State of Michigan. The pamphlets are designed to inform the Spanish-speaking community about such public health matters as the need for children's vaccinations, and the availability of amniocentesis testing to detect latent birth defects (spina bifida, for instance) and confidential HIV testing. I have also worked as an *ad hoc* interpreter when migrant workers speaking only Spanish have had to seek emergency medical treatment at area hospitals. My task is not only to relay accurate information in both directions, but also to reassure the patients, who may well be confused and frightened by the strange language and environment, that they will be taken care of. If the patient and family are at ease, the hospital personnel can communicate more fully and specifically with them and more accurately and rapidly establish diagnoses.

Sometimes such interaction can be quite extended. For instance, last November, I was called by the Lansing City Rescue Mission to assist them with a family which had just arrived from Mexico; neither the mother, the father, nor the three small children spoke any English. Although the weather was very cold, all were dressed in flimsy, short-sleeved clothing, and all—with the exception of the father—were visibly sick. During the medical examination of the children—each of whom had severe bronchitis—I helped the mother to understand what was being done and what was being asked of her, including what passed for a clinical history. The mother was

found to be suffering from a highly infectious sexually transmitted disease. I explained to her how the disease is transmitted and the need for prophylactics to prevent further infection. I was also asked to explain this matter to the father. I informed the family that they needed to continue treatment at the clinic on a regular basis and that they would be provided with a volunteer physician, who would care for them. Finally, I accompanied the family to the Rescue Mission and assisted them in getting winter-weight clothing as well as basic foodstuffs to provide for their well being until they could get settled.

Such community service seems to me a logical extension of what I do as a professor of Spanish. One of my chief responsibilities as an educator is to enhance communication, and this responsibility does not stop at the walls of the classroom. By extending my attention outward from the confines of the University itself to the larger society that houses and supports our institution, I feel I can best reach the overall goal of fostering a better and more complete understanding between the Spanish-speaking community and its non-Spanish speaking neighbors.