



Respect Works Here

Community Champion

Meeting **Maytée Ferrigno**, who was nominated as a Community Champion for her dedication to the community through her work at Vernon and District Immigrant and Community Services Society (VDICSS) and teaching Spanish at Okanagan College, as well as her dedicated volunteer efforts, is like being enveloped in a warm, cheerful bubble. She and her husband Juan share their story openly.

Coming to Canada was going to be a short-term adventure, a way to escape the unrest and guerrilla warfare in their home country of Guatemala. Nearly 30 years later, and via southern Manitoba and northern Alberta, they are now happy to call Vernon home.

After fourteen years in Grande Prairie, the weather was an initial draw for the couple, but they have found so much more to keep them here.

"I love everything about Vernon," says Maytée. "It is very peaceful here. This is one of the main reasons we are in Canada. We were looking for peace and opportunities and we found them."

Leaving their home and settling in Canada wasn't without sacrifices. Juan's family owned a coffee plantation and he always dreamed of running it. Not speaking English, his only option was to work as a labourer all day, and to

go to school at night. Maytée, who had learned English at school, was initially the family interpreter but then four months after arriving in Canada, they had their first child, and she became very lonely and isolated.

"It was a roller coaster of emotions," she says. "Like every immigrant, at first everything was beautiful and then I started missing my family. It was very, very hard having a baby and not having family close by. I asked myself, what did I do? But then you see how many things you gained. Canada has brought us lots of opportunities and for the kids especially. They are why we stayed."

Choosing to stay home for the first ten years in Canada to focus on raising their three children meant more sacrifices with Juan working all day and studying at night, but it was important for them both that the children learn Spanish and about their culture. "I want them to be proud of their roots, their language, their food," says Maytée. "The kids are fluent in Spanish and maintain many Guatemalan traditions and mesh them with new Canadian ones."

Trained as an electrical engineer, Maytée has never been able to work as one in Canada and it is an obvious regret. However, she has found a new passion in working for non-profits and now

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uses her personal history to support newcomers coming to VDICSS.

"I find I can really put myself in their shoes and really understand them because I have been through all the stages," she says of her role as Employment Counselor and Job Developer at the VDICSS. "I help them find their way with meaningful work and careers. The personal connection with my clients and to see them transformed is so rewarding."

The key to success for newcomers according to Maytée is flexibility, positive thinking and hard work. Lots of hard work and lots of positive thinking!

