

For submission to the Forum

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In November of 2022, the President of Kutztown University asked me to be the commencement speaker for the December Commencement. I was surprised and honored to be able to tell the story of how teaching Spanish and working with future language teachers became such an integral part of my life. This is my story! (and of course, PSMLA has had a huge role in my career!)

Commencement December 17, 2022

Good afternoon, President Hawkinson, Trustees, Esteemed guests

and the December Class of 2022 of Kutztown University.

I am honored by this opportunity to address the almost alumni of KU! As you prepare to run out these doors for the last time and face a myriad of challenges, I too face similar challenges. Next semester is my last before retirement and my Magic 8 Ball has seen better days. So, as I contemplate the many zigs and zags of my professional life, and as I leave my most beloved career that has brought me much joy, I wonder not only about my next venture, but also what words I might give you to provide some insight into yours.

First off: Why Spanish? and Why KU? Almost no one asks me why I teach but I will tell you anyway. My first teaching gig took place in the cellar steps of the farmhouse where I grew up. I was about 7 or 8 and I decided to teach my cats how to read and write. My pupils were not especially motivated and frequently disappeared for days on end. (and teaching cats to read

and write was NOT the incentive I had for the classroom!) Actually I became a teacher because my practical and frugal parents said I had to come out of college with a profession, so I got certified to teach Spanish K-12 along with a BA.

Now, why Spanish? I owe this to my father (my very first mentor) and ironically, his health conditions. When I was young, my parents decided that they would someday retire to a warm place (PA winters can be brutal). They discovered the absolute perfect climate (except for hurricanes) of Puerto Rico and bought their future retirement house. We all started spending a lot of time on that beautiful island. My very pragmatic father decided that if he was to be a homeowner in PR, then it would be a great idea to learn Spanish. He enrolled in Millersville State College's Spanish classes and quickly became involved in all the extracurricular activities that were offered. How do I fit into this picture other than getting to get to know firsthand the island of Borinquen? Well, my dad would pick me up from junior high and instead of taking me home, I would end up at Millersville – at one of these Spanish activities - and get to hang out with all the Spanish majors and minors (and my father) before getting to go home. My father quickly made friends with one of his Spanish professors, Mrs. Beatriz Killough, who helped him through his entire gamut of all the Spanish courses at Millersville. And no one was surprised that I joined them six years later, where I found myself majoring in Spanish (and I eventually had an upper-level course with my father).

Mentor #2: Mrs. Killough became my mentor, my professor, and a lifelong friend. When I graduated from Millersville, I really had no clue what I wanted to do but I was offered money to teach in an urban junior high and I took the job. I later switched to a rural school and taught high school Spanish, and then English as a Second Language to a group of adult male Marielitos,

Cuban refugees in the army barracks of Fort Indiantown Gap. But I must admit that my best insight into teaching and learning came about with our two children (and now grandchildren); I was absolutely fascinated observing them as they learned to speak! And I regret that although I tried hard to bring them up bilingual, reading and singing to them in Spanish, they came home from nursery school and told me: “Mommy, English!” Today they both regret not learning more Spanish. And this is a conundrum that I cannot go back in time to solve. But I digress: Sixteen years after graduation from Millersville, two small kids, both my parents now gone (and us trying to settle their estate in PA and Puerto Rico), Mrs. Killough saw me floundering – I was a rudderless ship and had no clue how to proceed. Mrs. Killough encouraged me to apply to grad school at the U of D – 45 minutes from home – get paid to teach as a graduate assistant and get an MA in Spanish literature in the bargain. This was my first professional moment of serendipity!

That day I stepped into a Spanish class at U of D as a college instructor, I knew it! I had found my joy! I also loved my major – reading copious quantities of tragic (and at times indecipherable) peninsular literature. Yet, I almost quit when I was trying to write a paper in Spanish about some literary theory that I had never heard of before. Four pages into this seemingly impossible task, we had a freak blizzard/thunderstorm, and the power went out. Every word of that miserable paper was lost. Of course, I cried and screamed at the gods of blizzard/thunderstorms – but I knew if I didn’t hurry up and get right back to it, I would never be able to finish. Fast forward to when I graduated, Delaware offered me a teaching job and I spent the next year happily doing what I love! But then a zigzag: I was offered more money, good benefits and an opportunity to use my Spanish as a bilingual claims rep for a government

agency. Money is seductive and it is very hard to resist. This job brought me no joy; I lasted there 3 years.

Which brings me to the next question: So why KU? KU offered me a teaching position and hence allowed me to gracefully leave the government job that I was never cut out to have. I started teaching here in 1998 (yes, driving 62 miles each way) and I loved it, found much joy but I knew that without a doctorate, I would have a very precarious future. So, thirteen years after I had graduated with my MA at U of D (and 37 years after earning my BA), I started a doctoral program at Penn State -researching the very intriguing topic of how should we be teaching Spanish to our heritage speakers – those that come to us with an extensive home background and already speaking Spanish. This was indeed my next moment of serendipity! I finished in 2011 (yes, only 11 years ago) and soon thereafter, wrote and taught the pilot course for Written and Oral Communication for Spanish-speaking Heritage Learners. I was also very involved in teaching, mentoring, and supervising our world language teacher candidates, and there was nothing more I love than getting them involved in our professional community, taking them to conferences for PA State Modern Language Association and the NorthEast Council for Teachers of Foreign Languages. Watching my former students find their true profession has been an amazing experience and I try to keep in touch with as many as I can! One of my first heritage learner grads is now the recruitment coordinator for the PA State Police, and many others found their way to professions that utilize their bilingual skills including teaching. In fact, just this year, two of our wonderful alum Spanish teachers were named Teacher of the Year at their respective schools (one in FL and one in NJ), and another was

ordained into the Catholic priesthood in the Diocese of Allentown. I tell anyone who will listen:

We have the best and brightest students right here at Kutztown University!

As I wrap up my KU teaching career and this speech – and after all my career changes, zigs and zags, joys and sorrows, mis-steps and mistakes (and the occasional serendipity), I offer you this advice: Find a mentor – Be a mentor like my dad and Mrs. Killough, embrace your failures – or mis-steps – and learn from them, if life gives you moments of serendipity, run with them!

Accept the zigs and zags that you will face, learn from them as well - but above all, don't ever stop looking for the joy that hopefully awaits us all in our next venture!