



PHOTO BY JOSEPH GLODE

Cristina Castaño Henao discusses what it was like to be a social worker in Colombia at her boyfriend's house in St. Johns.

CRISTINA, from page 5

After she began working at JOIN, she was surprised further to discover she had the means to help people pay their electricity bills and could offer them money to buy groceries.

"In Colombia, I had kids asking me for a little piece of crayon," she said.

While the problems Latinos face in the U.S. are different from those faced in Colombia, she said they are just as real.

"You see them dealing with racism and not knowing that it's racism. You see the lack of opportunities," she said. "They can't get sick - they have TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) and food stamps, which is never enough, but no bus tickets. They are embarrassed to ask for help, so you see them walk four miles to the store."

She helps the families she works with navigate the city and tells them where they can buy cheap Hispanic foods and how to garden.

"Most don't know anything outside their three blocks - they don't know how to use the bus," she said.

Coming from countries with fewer resources, she said, the people she works with never expect the kind of help her organization and others can provide.

"If you are from there, and you come here? This is heaven! They are shocked." She said

it's not uncommon for her clients to be so grateful that they will hug her, kiss her and cook for her.

But that's another cultural difference.

"The first time a man was crying because he was drinking again, I touched his shoulder," she said. A co-worker told her it was inappropriate for her to touch him.

"I had no idea. We hug and kiss when we say 'hi' and 'goodbye.' So touching a shoulder is the best way to help to comfort you if you are crying, so there are things I know I am not allowed. But my Latinos, I always hug and kiss them, and I eat in their houses. I don't think I'm allowed to do that with any white household; it's just different."

Since she's been in Portland, Cristina has touched the lives of many immigrants trying to make their way in a new country, much like she is.

But for one dying woman, Cristina traveled thousands of miles to make her final wish come true.

It took Maria three attempts before she successfully crossed the U.S.-Mexico border, but she was determined to make a new life, documented or not, in America. ("Maria" is a pseudonym, as JOIN requested we not use her real name.)

When she arrived in the U.S., she was healthy and strong, with striking gray eyes and high hopes for the future. She came to Portland because she had some distant relatives who lived in the area, but she never really clicked with them.

She gave birth to a little boy, but then she got sick. First it was bone cancer, and she lost part of her leg, making her permanently disabled.

When Cristina began working with her, she was living with her son in a garage that had been converted into an apartment. Cristina said she remembered Maria saying that she wished she could visit her mother and sister in Mexico City one last time, but Cristina warned her that she wouldn't be able to get back into the U.S. if she did that, and her son was a U.S. citizen.

Eventually, Cristina was able to get Maria a housing voucher and moved her into a nicer apartment.

Then she was diagnosed with heart failure. "She could never really understand what was happening," Cristina said.

This spring, Cristina was summoned to Oregon Health & Science University hospital because she was listed as Maria's emergency contact.

The hospital staff had called her because they needed her help in telling Maria that she was dying. While Cristina was able to relay the information, she said Maria didn't fully understand for some time. She was in pain and heavily medicated.

"After a month, she finally understood she was going to pass away," Cristina said. "She

came here full of hope, and all she got was cancer, disability, zero income."

No hospice would take her, because she was an undocumented immigrant without insurance, and she could no longer live on her own.

One day, while meeting with staff at Portland's Mexican Consulate with another Latino family she was assisting, Cristina mentioned she was working with a woman who needed to go to Mexico if she was going to die with dignity.

In Mexico, she would be able to access hospice care and could be in the company of her loved ones.

She was told the Mexican Consulate could pay the airfare. But someone needed to accompany her because she was very ill.

Cristina said she would do it.

JOIN's executive director, Shannon Singleton, said she wasn't at all surprised when Cristina came up to her and asked if the organization could figure out a way

to send her thousands of miles to Mexico.

"She is so dedicated to the folks that she serves that it just kind of made sense to me that that would be on her mind to do," Singleton said.

"I don't even know that (other) folks would think that it was an acceptable thing to ask for, and I was also really proud that we were able to do it."

Pulling off this operation was no small feat. Cristina secured dual citizenship for Maria's 8-year-old son, ensuring he could make the trip with his mother without incident.

She made phone calls to Maria's family in Mexico, to prepare them for what they would see. The woman who had left 13 years ago looked quite different from the woman who would return, dying and disabled with yellowing skin and eyes, Cristina said.

Cristina flew with Maria to Mexico City, where a room full of excited family and neighbors greeted them at the hospital. Maria's mother and sister cried tears of joy as they hugged and kissed Maria.

Cristina stayed with Maria for five days, making sure her health care was in order and the family was OK. She said that when she left, it seemed Maria was finally at peace with dying.

Maria died four days later. She was 37.

When asked why she felt it was so important to take Maria back to Mexico City in her final days, Cristina's response was an incredulous, "Wouldn't you do that?"

"You see them dealing with racism and not knowing that it's racism. You see the lack of opportunities. ... They are embarrassed to ask for help, so you see them walk four miles to the store."

CRISTINA CASTAÑO HENAO

emily@streetroots.org

Follow @GreenWrites on Twitter.

Change worth reading about

street roots

