

SOUTHERN EXPOSURE



R.J. Marx/The Daily Astorian

Gudelia Contreras and Ane McIntyre celebrate a focus on Latina women seeking to continue their schooling.

WINGS program reaches out to Latina community

WINGS offers educational opportunities for women who have had their education interrupted and are yearning to go back to school.

The American Association of University Women sponsors the all-day program, to be held Feb. 9 at Clatsop Community College in Astoria.

Women may find their studies interrupted for “all sorts of reasons,” Ane McIntyre, president of Seaside’s AAUW chapter, said in a visit to the Signal office late this month. “Their car broke down. They lost their babysitter. Their mother died. They are married to a military man and they bounced around the country. An unexpected baby — almost all the time, the thing that interrupted their education was money.”

A new push, McIntyre said, is outreach to the Latina community — a drive, she admits, that should have been undertaken much sooner.

“Last year 64 women went, and 16 were Latina,” McIntyre said. “They hadn’t been coming before that because we didn’t make it easy for them to come. This is our 17th year, and I’m embarrassed to say, we’ve only reached out to the Latina community two years prior to this — and not very well.”

Program organizers have a welcome addition to their team.

Gudelia Contreras, who participated in the WINGS program in 2012, is “instrumental” in reaching a new audience, McIntyre said.

“One of the things that Gudelia has done for us is we realized there is a whole population we were not serving. She can reach out to Hispanic women who may be afraid to take advantage of WINGS.”

Originally from Veracruz, Mexico, Contreras came to the United States in 1990, finding work as a migrant laborer and raising a family.

In the mid-1990s, she enrolled in English classes, but because of family and money issues, she left school.

Moving to Clatsop County in 2008, she found employment as a cannery worker.

Contreras made contact with Clatsop Community College on her daughter’s behalf.

“In 2011, my daughter was in high



WINGS

WINGS alumna Nayeli Cruz has five children and continues her schooling.

school and she didn’t have enough credits to graduate,” the Astoria resident said. “So I tried to reach somebody to get information about how she could get her GED.”

In 2012, she reached out again to the college — this time for herself.

“I said, ‘What can I do? I don’t want to be in the cannery for the rest of my life.’”

Contreras took a pretest and scored high. An adviser urged her to attend the WINGS conference.

“I said, ‘Sign me up,’” Contreras recalled.

At the conference, she expected to see only teenagers and young people. Instead, she encountered people her age — she is 52 now — “some younger and some older.”

“I thought, if they can do it, I can do it too,” Contreras said.

She received vouchers for testing, application fees and three college credits.

She passed the GED three months later, receiving her high school diploma and subsequently enrolling at Clatsop Community College.

Going to school and working full time was “really difficult,” Contreras said. In 2013, she had no car and worked at the cannery from 3 p.m. to 3 a.m.

At the end of the shift, she walked from the cannery back home, returning around 3:40, only to set the alarm at 7 to get to a math class at 8.

Contreras left the cannery in 2014, finding part-time employment while she continued her schooling. She earned her associate’s degree in general studies in 2016, and her goals began to take shape. She began working full time at the

WINGS CONFERENCE

WINGS 2019 is a free one-day conference open to all women, Saturday, Feb. 9, from 8 a.m. to 3:30 pm at Clatsop Community College, Columbia Hall, second floor.

Sessions and workshops include Clatsop Community College degrees, certificate programs and pathways, GED, job skills, student financial aid, scholarships, career planning and non-traditional careers, conquering math anxiety, CCC admissions and support services for students and the Lives in Transition Program.

The event is a collaboration of the Seaside and Astoria branches of the American Association of University Women and Clatsop Community College. Free breakfast, lunch and professional child care are provided.

Real-time Spanish translation with earphones will be provided for Latina attendees.

Preregistration, either online or by phone, is required. For information or to register, go to clatsopcc.edu or call 503-717-1852.

Lower Columbia Hispanic Council as an Oregon Health Plan outreach and enrollment specialist.

This spring, she will continue her undergraduate education with online classes from Portland State University.

Overcoming barriers

The WINGS program — a loose acronym for “Women Interested in Going to School” — is free and available to citizens and noncitizens alike.

But the country’s political environment has made some Latinas wary, Contreras said.

“It is kind of difficult now because people are kind of scared,” she said. “They don’t know if it’s really free or (a way) to find out where you are.”

Many Latinas working in the cannery come from countries where they may have received schooling or a degree, but are unaware of education options here, Contreras said.

“They don’t know,” she said. “And when you don’t know what you can do, you are blind. But after you tell them what they can do, answer their questions — ‘Do I have to quit my cannery job tomorrow?’ No. It’s going to take time. It is not going to take just six months. Just learning English is going to take a year, or more than that.”

After learning about the WINGS program, she added, more than half opt for the education.

The biggest obstacle is the “fear factor,” McIntyre said.

“You’d be amazed at what the self-esteem issue can do to people thinking, ‘I’m too old,’ ‘I’m too far down the road,’ ‘I won’t fit in,’ ‘I don’t know enough English.’ We tell them (AAUW is) 50 women who are here to help you — there’s no catch.”

Women in the program pursue varied interests, with many approaching the medical field, where “there’s always going to be a need, no matter how old you are,” Contreras said.

Corporate partnerships

Members of AAUW now emphasize outreach both to Latina women and the companies they work for, McIntyre said.

Providence Seaside, Seaside Kiwanis and Walmart are among businesses to contribute to the program. AAUW is reaching out to local employers, including the canneries.

These companies feel their workers will get a sense of “hope and inspiration, and will probably continue working when they’re in school,” McIntyre said.

A Walmart manager told McIntyre not only can any woman who wants to go have the day off, “but she will be written on the schedule so she will be paid on Walmart’s dime.”

“She’s one of our success stories, someone who’s really made it after graduating from WINGS,” McIntyre said.

“I keep telling people that the WINGS conference was the best payday I ever had,” Contreras said. “I had my GED paid, my registration, my placement paid, the college credits paid — over \$500. That got me started.”

For Contreras, the experience has been life-changing.

“Oh my God. There are not words to express how I feel. I come from Mexico, a family of seven — and I’m the first person to go to university.”

She is confident others will benefit from her example. “They see if I can do it, they can do it.”

R.J. Marx is editor of the Seaside Signal and Cannon Beach Gazette, and covers South County for The Daily Astorian.

‘THIS IS OUR 17TH YEAR, AND I’M EMBARRASSED TO SAY, WE’VE ONLY REACHED OUT TO THE LATINA COMMUNITY TWO YEARS PRIOR TO THIS — AND NOT VERY WELL.’