

*Alicia Dickson is expanding her role as a Bilingual and Bicultural Forensic Interviewer by taking on a new function as the Coordinator of our Bilingual/Bicultural Program. Alicia joined Ralston House in August 2018 as a Victim and Family Support Advocate and became a Bilingual and Bicultural Forensic Interviewer in 2022. She grew up in the Ciudad Juarez, Mexico-El Paso, TX region. We are giving her a space here to introduce herself to you.*

Two days after I was born in a clinic in El Paso, Texas, I slept in my mother's arms as we crossed the Bridge of the Americas back into Mexico, Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua to be exact.

I spent some of those early days singing with my cousin while swinging in a hammock in the backyard; chasing the neighborhood cats under skeletons of cars my uncle had promised to fix; and watching the men in my family stir hot tar in a barrel with a mop while I ate blackberries from our tree. There were difficult things, too: my father drinking with his friends instead of coming home for the weekend; my grandfather knocking on the windshield, waving at women crossing the street in front of his car, women looking back with frightened faces; and my mother taking me to visit family members in graves I was told to cover with marigolds.

Last week a teenager shared details with me of his arrival to the US from Venezuela: his family arrived in Mexico where a man guiding them to the border threw a party for them; a group of traffickers arrived at the party and the man told the teenager and his family to follow the traffickers to a building nearby. They were held for innumerable days, belongings and identifications taken from them, until the same man who had thrown the party came by and let them know they were free. The teenager and his family then joined a long line of migrants crossing the Rio Grande together, side by side; he described the chaos of saving his mother from drowning.

My journey to the US was not violent. I was not kidnapped and my crossing over the Rio Grande was not on foot. I grew up on the border where I experienced loss I still carry with me. Growing up I did not have the words to express a feeling that grew stronger inside of me every day, a feeling that I was *ni de aqui, ni de aya*. I felt I belonged *neither here nor there*, meaning I didn't belong in Mexico anymore once I left it and I didn't belong in the US when I arrived. I existed in this in-between, non-belonging space.

Some of the children I have interviewed have described their sense of loss upon arriving in the US. Some talk about the loneliness they've experienced from being unable to speak English. Some talk about the safety they've recovered in the US, having moved away from perpetrators who had abused them in their home country. Some talk about the friends and family members they've left behind. Some talk excitedly about the educational opportunities and the beautiful

clothes they can buy at the mall. Some cry about leaving countries ravished by violence and poverty only to arrive in the US to experience abuse instead.

I was 9 years old when I moved to the US. We lived in an apartment that was one big room divided by two curtains into four smaller rooms: the dining room; the room with the fridge and the stove; the tv room; and the bedroom where rats danced on our bellies while we slept. The bedroom had a window facing a bridge outside, a bridge over a canal, a canal where the rats came from. My mom told me not to tell my school about the rats, but I told my teacher anyway; I told him in Spanish, and he pointed to a piece of paper pinned on the pocket of his shirt that read *English only*, my teacher unable or unwilling to see, understand and protect me.

At school, a boy threw a fistful of rocks at my face during recess so to put me back together, my teacher sent me to an after-school program at a high school nearby. At the high school, girls in plaid uniforms loaded a computer game for me. In the game, I made a brown gorilla climb yellow ladders until the school bus picked me up.

Attending that after school program changed something inside of me. The girls in the plaid uniforms spoke the language of my heart: Spanish. Attending the program every Wednesday, I learned to use a computer to write about my life in Mexico: memories of my hands splattering water in a barrel edged with rust, my feet on a milk crate, my uncle describing crop circles, and the sound of birds sleeping under sheets. I learned to bridge my Mexican life with my new American one. I excelled academically as my education progressed and became the first person in my family to go to college by attending the University of Notre Dame.

Although adults in my early life in the US seemed to wear *English only* signs on their chests, I became a bilingual forensic interviewer to give children a safe space to tell their stories in the language of their heart. As a bilingual/bicultural forensic coordinator, I am responsible for leading the coordination of bilingual and bicultural programs and services at Ralston House while writing policies regarding language access and actively training staff concerning bilingual programs, cultural issues and cultural considerations of the communities we serve.

At Ralston House, I participate in a multidisciplinary team (MDT) composed of professional partners from the fields of human services, law enforcement, and victim advocacy. Together, we collaborate to ensure an effective response for those we serve. As the new bilingual/bicultural coordinator, some of my areas of focus in 2024 include 1) identifying, creating, and delivering effective bilingual and bicultural training to our professional partners and 2) creating and fostering a network of community experts who can in turn share their knowledge, trends and resources with Ralston House, other community organizations and our

professional partners through a variety of trainings and outreach. Although I have experience working with Spanish-speaking families, I will not solely focus on Spanish-speaking children and families.

Collaborating with a multidisciplinary team on a variety of cases has highlighted our need to address additional cultural considerations when working with communities of color such as historical and intergenerational trauma, addiction, and the trauma of poverty.

I also seek to understand more about the cultural considerations of and barriers Asian American and Pacific Islander communities face. One of my responsibilities is to make sure that appropriate interpreters and resources are available for our Hard of Hearing and Deaf communities.

I am not an astronaut floating in space, talking to someone far away in a control tower; I learn, grow, and thrive in a collaborative environment where ideas are freely exchanged without fear or judgment. I meet people where they are. I give people space to tell their stories, even the ones that others may not want them to tell.

Everywhere I've been I've carried the desert with me. I carry the memory of my father driving us over the Bridge of the Americas to visit my grandmother; the brightness of the star placed on the Franklin Mountain; and the gritty feeling on my fingers as I traced an eagle of Aztlan painted on the wall of an abandoned community center in downtown El Paso.

I am grateful for this opportunity to strengthen our bilingual/bicultural program so that all the communities Ralston House serves may be seen, understood, and protected.