



2015 Project Report: Mujeres Unidas Avanzando

Despite losing a day to snow, this year's Project Week was my most rewarding by far. I volunteered at Mujeres Unidas Avanzando (Women United in Action), an organization dedicated to supporting low-income Latina women. Located in Dorchester, MUA is a vital support system to hundreds of women, providing job training, counseling, and child care to supplement their central curriculum of English and GED classes. MUA is different from other organizations with similar missions, because it seeks to offer holistic support. Because most of MUA's students have children, learning English and preparing for job interviews are difficult tasks, and often, there is simply not enough time in the day to allow for real progress. For this reason, MUA operates based off the demanding schedule of their clients, offering all classes during school hours, so the women will not have to choose between family responsibilities and their training. MUA's child-care program is also vitally important to the organization's mission, and women can feel confident that their children will be well looked after throughout class hours.

I divided my time between the two departments, working in the child-care department for the first day, and assisting with classes for the last three days. I thoroughly enjoyed my first day, and loved spending time with the children enrolled in the day-care program. While ages varied, most of the children were old enough to be proficient in both Spanish and English, while their teachers knew only a few basic English vocabulary words. While I was nervous at first, the teachers were very welcoming and enthusiastic, graciously understanding when I needed a word or sentence repeated. The child-care staff was in the midst of planning their curriculum for the next few months, and I spent most of my time the first day creating calendars to display in the classroom. Working from a list of previous activities, as well as my own ideas, I created four calendars, making sure that each

day fulfilled the day-care's four core goals of literacy, arts, history, and culture. The staff suggested some changes, and then I worked on formatting and adding images to the calendars. When I printed my work at the end of the day, the daycare staff was overjoyed at the result, and posted the calendars in a prominent position on the wall. They told me that it was hard for them to work on computer programs like Microsoft Word, since the default setting was English and they had little experience with it.

For the next three days, I worked closely with Marisol, the women in charge of the beginning and second-level ESOL (English For Speakers of Other Languages) courses. Each morning, I met with Marisol before the beginning of class to go over that day's lesson plan, assist with photocopying, and discuss corrected homework. The second-level class was focusing on letter-writing, and during class, I worked with students whose letters showed weakness in basic grammar and spelling, while Marisol led an activity in pronunciation for the more advanced students. On my last day, Marisol tasked me with planning and leading the beginner-level class on my own. Using the vocabulary lists they had been studying, I led the twenty students through a writing exercise, and then a dialogue workshop to practice pronunciation and inflection skills. The rest of the class was devoted to an arts and crafts activity, with the students working in groups and using magazines and newspapers to create vocabulary-themed posters, integrating the words they had learned with familiar images.

Overall, I thoroughly enjoyed my experience at Mujeres Unidas Avanzado. It was very challenging to speak entirely in Spanish, but I appreciated the opportunity to use my skills outside of the familiar context of a Commonwealth classroom. This year's Project Week reminded me of the true importance of learning a language; it connects you with other people. During my work at MUA, I felt connected to an organization whose mission of helping women in need I passionately

support, and I was able to utilize the skills I'd learned over my years in Commonwealth Spanish, finally making use of the hours of conjugation practice. I would recommend an internship at MUA to any student who is similarly dedicated to community service and willing to stretch their language skills in a real-world context.