



Woodstock Community Unit School District 200

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D200 employee heading to Mexico City as a Fulbright Scholar

A Verda Dierzen Early Learning Center employee and aspiring teacher will attend the prestigious Fulbright-Hays study abroad program this summer in Mexico City.

Mercedes Arias, currently a bilingual home school liaison, was born in California and raised in Mexico until 8th grade. She returned to the United States to attend Northwood Middle School before graduating from Woodstock High School in 2009.

“Being part of the same district where my educational journey in the U.S. began feels surreal and full circle,” she said.

Arias has two semesters to complete at National Louis University before obtaining her teaching degree. She has been a Verda Diezen employee for eight years while studying and raising her two children, who attend Westwood Elementary School.

The Fulbright-Hays program, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, is designed to strengthen foreign language teaching and cultural understanding by creating opportunities for students to study abroad.

“This program represents everything I care about: Education, culture, language, and the importance of representation. Through this opportunity, I feel incredibly proud to represent my school, my students, and my heritage,” Arias said.

Keely Krueger, an assistant superintendent at Woodstock Community Unit School District 200 who supervises the Dual Language program, taught Arias English when Arias was in high school. Coincidentally, Krueger was also a Fulbright-Hays scholar who studied in Estonia at the start of her educational career.

“I’m excited for Mercedes to experience all that this program has to offer and thrilled about the cultural and language enrichment that she’ll bring back to our school community,” Krueger said.

Arias will depart for Mexico City on June 25 and return on Aug. 28. The scholarship covers her airfare, tuition, meals, and lodging. Only eight National Louis students were selected for the program, which is a partnership with Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico, known as a cornerstone of Mexican culture, education, and progress.

Upon her return, Arias will complete her degree by student teaching at Dean Street Elementary School, and she hopes to continue her career teaching elementary school in Woodstock Community Unit School District 200’s Dual Language program.

“As a bilingual Latina educator, I believe representation matters. I want students to see someone who looks like them and speaks their language leading a classroom. That sends a powerful message: ‘You belong. Your voice matters.’”