

LUCIA ASENSIO MISANTONI

LABORER FOR LITERACY

Written by June Grayson, Photographed by Richard Grayson

During the day she works with numbers - big numbers - and money and power. She is the financial controller of the rapidly-expanding American subsidiary of a German manufacturing company.

But it is on Tuesday evening, when she is the language facilitator at a college literacy class, that she gives herself to the world.

Lucia Asensio Misantoni knows what can happen when you learn another language. When she was a student at the University of Madrid, she had to write to a Chicago penpal assigned by her English teacher. She wrote to her penpal, he corrected her English, and they fell in love. He came to Madrid for their wedding. Since 1961, they have lived happily ever after in the Chicago suburbs.

When their three children began junior high school and no longer came home to lunch, Misantoni returned to school. Even though she had her accounting degree from the University of Madrid, transferring college credits from Spain was difficult and time-consuming, so she repeated college in the United States.

She took advanced placement tests to gain college credits and enrolled at North Central College in Naperville, Illinois. She graduated with a double major in accounting and computers.

With two technical degrees and fluency in four languages - Spanish, French, English, and some Portuguese - she was ready for the corporate fast track. "When you know several languages you are more valuable to your company. You can communicate and

understand people better," Misantoni says.

"I love my work but it isn't enough. I always wanted to help foreigners, because I was once a foreigner myself," Misantoni says. "I know how hard it is at the beginning. You have an accent. People think you are not very bright. They don't mean to be unkind, but they don't understand that your accent has nothing to do with your brains!"

Misantoni is one of 65 part-time paid educators at the College of DuPage (COD) in Chicago's western suburbs. She supervises fifteen unpaid volunteer tutors and 91 English as a second language students every Tuesday night at a suburban library. She meets with her volunteers at 6.00 p.m. to discuss the classwork for the evening. She presents the subject matter to the entire group of 91 students at 7.00 p.m. She tests the students and distributes the appropriate work-books and literacy materials. Then she assigns the students to the volunteers who can be most helpful to them.

According to Joanna Escobar, director of the department of adult basic education at COD, 5,000 students are enrolled this year in her department and 3,000 of them are studying English as a second language. "We think we have provided a structure that allows for the intimacy and interaction that is essential to

develop language competence. We do not want our students just to survive - we want them to succeed in their new culture."

Escobar, also of Spanish heritage and with a master's degree in linguistics from Columbia University, New York, continues, "We can even free up our volunteers so that they can work one-to-one with students. We have an engineer from Ecuador whose English skills are not yet good enough so that she can practice her profession here. We have been able to assign her to a volunteer from Costa Rica who is also an engineer."

"No matter how far I have to drive to class, or how late we stay in class, my literacy work inspires and energizes me," Misantoni says. "Every student is a success story. They gain necessary skills, as well as confidence and dignity, from their accomplishments."

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