



PALS
INTERNATIONAL
Your Passport to Global Success

News Article

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The Language of Success

Brenda Arbeláez pulls out a bunch of heavy photo albums from the small bookshelf near her desk. At one time Arbeláez took pictures of every student taking classes with her company, Pan American Languages & Services, Inc.

She flips through the pages like a proud mother, identifying students as far back as 1983, when she began teaching Spanish at the kitchen table of her Warren home. Arbeláez wants her students "to feel that they are part of us, that they are more than just clients, that they are friends," she explains. She has 105 students now; most work for Chrysler Corp. and Ford Motor Co.

In the beginning, PALS only offered instruction in Spanish. Now, the company helps corporate executives and their families relocate with cultural programs – and offers instruction in 15 languages. In a highly competitive market for language and relocation services, PALS has doubled its sales in the past year to \$410,000. Arbeláez' spunk and skills won her a spot as a translator on Gov. John Engler's Mexican trade mission this week.

"I wanted to go to make contacts," Arbeláez says. But she also wanted to avoid the more than \$1,000 price tag to the state, so she volunteered her services. She's going as translator to first lady Michelle Engler and so will attend all events and meetings.

John Field Reichardt, executive director of Michigan Export Development authority, which is sponsoring the trade trip, says many interpreters translate, but only a few – Arbeláez among them – can understand the technical business talk needed for the mission. Arbeláez, 47, met the Englers last month at a fund-raiser and spent three hours working with Michelle Engler on cultural and language training last week.

Before striking out on her own, Arbeláez taught Spanish at adult education classes, to children and at a private language school. "I knew I could do a better job and provide a better service," Arbeláez says. Throughout the early years, Arbeláez ran PALS out of her home, with classes in her basement. Her son, Andre, remembers growing up with PALS: "You couldn't have the TV on too loud, or scream at your sister. You adjusted when you knew there was a class," he says. These days, Andre is PALS director of operations.

To build her business, Arbeláez relied on word-of-mouth referrals. One example: A student from her adult education days recommended PALS when his boss sought language instruction for workers at Uniroyal. "I started my company and it was amazing how my former students remembered me. Every single story of my life is that way, beautiful people helping me," Arbeláez says. In 1987, a supervisor at Ford contacted Arbeláez about creating a relocation program, which included English classes for Mexican people.

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She took the challenge and recruited Susan Cunha, a longtime friend and teacher. The first students were three Mexican families, whom Cunha remembers fondly as “part of our extended family.” Arbeláez took a real estate class so she could help families understand real estate terms and find housing. She found schools for children, took families on tours (pointing out libraries and hospitals) and helped adults get driver licenses, cable television, utilities and generally to adjust. Today PALS has four relocations specialists who follow guidelines developed by Arbeláez. The company employs six people full-time and 60 part-time. It moved out of Arbeláez’ home in 1990 and into bigger quarters January 15.

In an effort to maintain the personal touch, the company holds classes wherever and whenever a client chooses and Arbeláez tries to meet each student. “Brenda finds out what is required, she gets to know students on an almost personal level. She provides me with good feedback, how individuals are progressing and what their needs are,” says Ray Wilhelm, who is responsible for all Chrysler Corp. employees who work outside their home countries.

“She provides a lot of social activities for students. It’s like one big family,” Wilhelm says. Arbeláez, her husband and two small children first visited the United States in 1975 from her native Colombia. They returned to the United States to live in 1980 and friends helped them adjust, providing emotional support, pots and pans and even a car.

Although she loves her new country and now is a U.S. citizen, Arbeláez talks longingly about the beauty of her native Santa Fe de Bogota, which is surrounded by mountains. “I will never stop being Colombian. I am Colombian in my heart,” she says, adding that her education at a Colombian boarding school run by nuns imparted drive and determination.

“She always had the conviction that she would be successful. She believed in herself and because of that she could hurdle all obstacles,” says her friend and worker Susan Cunha. Her son Andre also sees his mother’s determination. “Mom is good at schmoozing; she is very good at being with people. Mom single handedly made the business what it is today – she never did any marketing. Mom has a great rapport with the students,” he says.

He is pushing for PALS to open offices in other cities and take a higher profile. She’s more cautious, in part because she wants to stay personally involved. A few months ago Brenda Arbeláez was on a radio show talking about PALS. A former student called to say she used to take classes in Arbeláez’ basement and remembered how special it was. “This is what keeps me going, helping people and having people help me. I gave and I am receiving in bundles,” Arbeláez says.

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