

September 2016

"Me Llamó Meredith"

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Recommended Citation

Conn, Meredith (2016) ""Me Llamó Meredith,"" *The Idea of an Essay*: Vol. 3 , Article 12.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/idea_of_an_essay/vol3/iss1/12

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“Me Llamó Meredith”

Meredith Conn

Meredith is a junior Allied Health student on her way to graduate school for Occupational Therapy. She hopes to one day use her degree as a ministry and means of serving those around her. In her free time, Meredith enjoys teaching swing dancing lessons in the recreational center and tutoring students in Cedarville’s Writing Center.

Those words filled my entire body with panic. My heart was racing, my palms were sweating, and my legs could barely hold me up. It was my turn to introduce myself to the required Spanish class I needed to take in order to graduate from high school. I quickly stood up from my uncomfortable, scribbled on desk and, with a flushing face, muttered, “Me llamo Meredith.” As soon as the words left my mouth, I sat back down and stared at the vulgar sketches on my desk. I was terrified. While everyone else had already had years of Spanish exposure throughout middle school, this was my first day ever truly hearing and speaking it. When we had all finished introducing ourselves, our teacher smiled and said “¡Muy bien!”

My teacher, Señora Ortiz, was full of life. She embodied that fresh, beginning of the year spirit. It was also her first year teaching at North Hunterdon High School, located in the cornfields and farmland of northwest New Jersey. Though the classroom was boiling during the fall and freezing during the winter, Señora smiled and laughed as she enunciated every word. She had a hand gesture that went with every noun and an action to go with every verb. She would often point to objects in the room or draw them on the white board if we could not catch on. Capturing my attention was easy; however, grasping the meaning of the content was a challenge. Despite her welcoming and enthusiastic attitude in class, the idea of learning a whole new language continued to petrify me. As a result, the days turned into weeks, and I remained just as lost in this foreign language as I had been on the first day of class. Without a basic, background understanding of how the Spanish language

operated, I fell further and further behind. The conjugating of verbs, the identifying of masculine and feminine nouns, and the recognizing of various pronouns overwhelmed my thoughts. I struggled to make it through each class without completely giving up hope.

Each night, I would stare at my homework, type a few words into Google Translate, and then scribble them down onto the worksheet handed out that day. I had no one at home to help me with my simple but frequent questions. My sister, who had already taken years of high school Spanish, studied abroad in Mexico, and double minored in Spanish and ESL was away at college in Michigan. My parents did not speak a word of Spanish past the occasional Mexican dishes we ate for dinner. I was left alone to drown in the homework.

Though I found my other classes to be fairly easy, Spanish class was an impossible obstacle that I could not find any way around. I avoided answering questions in class and turned in incomplete homework and blank answers on quizzes. The trend continued for a few weeks until approximately half way through the first quarter, Señora handed a small, blank sheet of paper to each of us. She asked us to write down our individual goals that we wanted to achieve by the end of the quarter. At that point in time, I struggled to even keep a D in the course; it was due to drop again at any point. Coming from a homeschool background where I was accustomed to receiving straight A's, it was a major adjustment checking my grades online each day and seeing a nearly failing grade in Spanish. As that little piece of paper was passed to me, I wrote down that my goal was to simply get a C for the quarter. It struck me then, the degree to which my expectations had fallen and how far I was from the same standards I had held myself to just months earlier in middle school. Not only that, but the grade on my report card started taking priority over my actual learning experience. My goal should have been education first, and the reflecting of that through my grades, second.

I felt a sudden change, a new determination to transform the way I approached my Spanish training. At the end of class, I approached Señora's desk in the front of the classroom and inquired

if she had any available time after school to review homework and help correct quiz questions. She was delighted to do so and we arranged to meet in the "Lingo Lab" where students went for tutoring in foreign languages.

When we met there that afternoon, I found Señora sitting at a row of desks in the lab with a pile of worksheets and blank, lined paper in front of her. The golden afternoon sunlight streamed through the windows and illuminated the dust collecting on the rows of computers. I sat down as she said, "¡Hola, Meredith! I'm glad you came to see me. What can I help you with?"

At that moment, every emotion of utter helplessness surged forth and my eyes began to water. I felt my face turn red and all I could reply was, "I don't even know." Her face filled with sympathy as she took out a blank sheet of paper and began writing down what appeared to be random sounds and words. She then proceeded to ask me if I knew what they were and what they meant. I shook my head awkwardly and felt ashamed because all the other students had known them before the first day of school.

However, Señora's reaction was not one of anger or annoyance. Instead, she nodded understandingly and said, "Then let's begin here. These are personal pronouns. Each personal pronoun has its own conjugated verb that goes with it..." As she wrote them down, she translated each into English and made sure I understood it before moving on to the next word. She let me keep the notes and gave me helpful worksheets that I could refer to during class. When the forty-five minutes were up, I had to leave for a grueling, two hour long field hockey practice. However, Señora was thrilled that I took the time to come see her and I was grateful for the care and attention she took to reteach that foundational part of the material. After that initial breakthrough, I went nearly every day before field hockey practice to see Señora and review that day's lesson. Each day was filled with little but numerous and exciting epiphanies. Before long, I was able to understand class lectures and participate in class discussions. That low set goal I had written down on my little, white sheet of paper became a reality as I achieved and surpassed a C. I ended with a B that quarter and an A every quarter since, while also being accepted into the National Spanish Honor Society. Though

the grades were a pleasant reward to the original goal, learning and enjoying Spanish actually was my real achievement. That basis for my Spanish education helped me gain a new understanding of what it meant to truly be dedicated to something.

Señora Ortiz made all the difference in not only my Spanish education but in every subject and class I have taken since. She imparted on me the knowledge that hard work and dedication can achieve results worthy of being proud of. She educated me how to properly study and ask good questions. She taught me to not be embarrassed or ashamed of asking for help.

What I appreciated more than the academic help from Señora was the constant example of respectful character she displayed each time I met with her. She showed kindness and gentleness every time I visited and asked her questions. She demonstrated extraordinary patience when it took multiple tries for me to understand a new, or even old, concept. She trained me to practice humility and generosity to others if they were in need of help like I was when I first began.

At the end of that year, I had learned so much more than just a basic introduction to Spanish. I was exposed to the results of hard work and dedication. This work ethic that Señora established in me carries out to every project and class I take on today. When I enter into a challenging course like chemistry or calculus, there is, in a sense, a whole new language that must be learned. If I begin falling further and further behind and feel like there is no way to catch up, I simply think back to freshman year and all the hours I spent with Señora in that little Lingo Lab.

Those hours of frustration and elation, spent with a dedicated and loving teacher, taught me more than I ever could have asked for when enrolling in that required Spanish I class.