

["We are Millenials"]

AS: "Learning the Official, Unofficial Language of America." Hello, and welcome to the Harrisonburg 360 podcast where we discuss real people, real stories, in one community. I'm your host Anoush Stamm. The Harrisonburg 360 Podcast is an attempt to capture and record narratives of immigrants living in the Harrisonburg community. Using past and present voices of Harrisonburg immigrants, students in our JMU English class have collaborated to create a space focused on the importance of listening to each other's voices. Every person deserves a chance to share their story, and we, as a class, are privileged to share these stories with you in hopes of expanding perceptions of what it means to be an immigrant in Harrisonburg, Virginia. Each week, Harrisonburg 360 is produced by a different team of students. This week's episode, "Learning the Unofficial, Official Language of America," was produced by Michelle Pineda[-Hernandez], Anoush Stamm, Emma Knaus, Jay White, and Jake DeLaurier. In this week's episode, we'll be talking with Ms. Melissa Menjivar-Fuentes about her experiences as an immigrant in the United States, including topics such as language and education, and exploring how these issues have and have not changed in the Harrisonburg community. Language continues to be a barrier for people who wish to immigrate here to the United States. While English surprisingly is not the official language in the country, America has structured its societal foundation around English. This has contributed to major sources of stigma about people who seek to immigrate to the United States from countries that are not native born English speakers. Because of this stigma, there is quite a pressure on immigrants who are not native English speakers to learn this language out of a necessity to fit in and succeed in the US. Learning English as an immigrant can be very intimidating, starting from square one and sometimes can be a necessary burden on the person learning it, so they can have opportunities open to them here in the United States. Throughout our episode, this theme of needing to learn English in the US as a necessity is a repeated and lasting requirement of immigrants in the US seen through the interview we conducted with Ms. Melissa in 2020 and in the interviews of Ms. Thu Huynh and Mr. And Mrs. Sasha and Tanya Reut conducted in the 90s. Each interview brings a new perspective on language and education in the United States that we are happy to share with you today.

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AS: On February 28 2020, we talked with Katherine Melissa Menjivar-Fuentes about her experience living in Harrisonburg, Virginia. She and her family first immigrated to the United States five years ago from El Salvador because of the threatening situation her family faced. El Salvador has a large history, for the better part of 50 years, where high crime levels and other dangerous incidents that are threatening to civilian life, which has caused reason for constant mass migration from El Salvador. Much of the instability in El Salvador has been a direct result of US involvement in the country. As a result of financially supporting military schools during the Cold War era in El Salvador, the US has helped push El Salvador to a position of having weapons and trained military forces that have been a threat to civilian well being during current points of civic turmoil. Salvadorians have been migrating to the US out of fear in the home

country for quite a while now because of this. However, even when seeking safety in the US, barriers like learning English remain a necessary obstacle to overcome to stay and succeed here. Melissa, a high school senior in Harrisonburg High School, said she could have only spent one year there but opted to spend the full four to learn more, especially English. This is what Melissa had to say about this.

MPH: And what is one of the biggest challenges that you have faced upon arriving here?

MMF: I would say, learning English. That has been really hard.

MPH: And how have you been able to learn English here?

MMF: At school by having new friends that don't speak Spanish and also watching Netflix a lot. Yeah.

MPH: And would you say that the school that you go to provides a safe and healthy environment for you to learn English?

MMF: Yeah. Mm hmm.

AS: Melissa tells us that the school systems here have been very supportive of her learning. From her story, while it seems necessary to have an American education here in the US, being in the US school has offered her an easy way to learn more, both in academics and about the US culture as well.

MMF: So when I got here, they told me I had to be a freshman because I have to learn English. After I learned English, then they told me like I could decide if I want to graduate earlier or stay for four years. I decided to stay for four years.

MPH: So could you clarify a little bit more of what your education looks like here in Harrisonburg? And where you go?

MMF: I will say my education here in Harrisonburg, I like it. I like it more than El Salvador. I feel like I learn more here than when I was actually in El Salvador. And I don't know why but I also feel like I got even smarter here. I don't know why but in class, when the teacher is explaining things just get stuck in my head, and then I don't need to study and I get a good grade. And I feel like it's easier.

MPH: So overall, would you say that the experience has been positive?

MMF: Yeah

MPH: Since you've arrived?

MMF: Mm hmm.

AS: Melissa's story here helps give us insight into what learning English can be like in an American school system. To Melissa, the Harrisonburg city school system has been tremendously supportive in her education, which has made this transition for her a little easier.

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AS: We would now like to examine a few stories of other people who have immigrated to Harrisonburg and their accounts of learning English. These stories tie together in the main theme that English is a necessity here in the States, and taking the time to learn the language as an immigrant may mean losing something important like a cultural tie. Thu Huynh, a Vietnamese immigrant who has lived in Harrisonburg since 1988, talks about how hard it is to teach native languages to children of immigrants. Her account of her aunt's son can help reflect on how English is seen as the only real necessary language to know here in the States, where learning English can take priority over holding on to the other native pieces of cultural identity.

TS: And, like when you get married and you have a family are you going to teach your children how to cook and the language things like that?

TH: Yeah. I don't know they will learn or not. It's hard for them because they living here, they learn in school and they come home, they tired to talk Chinese and Vietnamese. Sometimes it's people, like my aunt's son, they forget. They forgot it, their own language.

TS: So they're not trying to teach it to them?

TH: They don't have time to teach them because her mom and dad have to keep working. No time to talk with them and then now they grow up. They don't want to talk.

TS: What do you think about that?

TH: It's really hard, very bad if you don't know much, you know? You see them, your people you know, from your country you don't know. And you need to talk English all the time.

AS: This theme of having to learn English as a necessity is further spoken on in our second interview, discussing Mr. and Mrs. Sasha and Tanya Reut's experience immigrating here to the US and learning English. The couple says they have both learned more English since being in the US and believe it is necessary now, especially to Sasha since he is working. As far as their education in Ukraine, neither of them said that they've been able to make use of their engineering education and experience in the US. Sasha was working in the Wampler poultry plant, and Tanya stayed home with the baby. This is what the couple had to say regarding the necessity of knowing English in the US.

TS: Speaking of English, learning English, did you know English before you came here? Did you learn it in Soviet Union or?

SR: We both, both me, I learned a little bit of English in in the university but it was just a little of the "my father, mother, sister, brother" and that sort. It's bread, it's a door, it's a window, and it was a maximum bore, because my attention was in other subjects. Either math, either physics, or any other because I always knew that foreign country close to me. And so I never dreamed about distant countries, especially about United States. So five years and five months, my English was a little bit more than zero, but Tanya English was absolutely because as soon as...

TR: I learned French, my second language and I did knew English from sing songs. Some words get attention, I just got to learn. I watch TV and hear on the radio, and go back to school, the Dayton Learning School, and our sponsor, when they came to talk to us. I try to understand some. I try to read some newspaper, and English book to help me. And now, it's a little bit better. We still learn English.

TS: Do you want to take more classes or do you just want to pick it up on your own?

SR: Yes, it is necessary for us, especially for me because now I'm working night shift for WLR [poultry plant], and the main problem for me is that I have not had the chance to speak with other people, like write English. Of course when we're here we will have a chance to learn English a little bit more. And we use any opportunity to speak or to learn English and to make our knowledge deeper and larger than it is.

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AS: In this episode we have examined similarities and differences among ideas surrounding language and education. While everyone's story is unique, these connections across time, cultural backgrounds, and situations give us a glimpse into the lives of immigrants in the Shenandoah Valley and what they share. They note the struggle of having to learn another language out of a necessity to succeed here in America. And while the education system can be supportive in this process, there may also be some tie to their home country or familial bond that is lost because of it. Hopefully from listening to this episode, you will take away that there are sacrifices made on individuals who choose to immigrate here out of a necessity to even attempt to succeed here in America. Thank you for joining us today on Harrisonburg 360. We're grateful to Ms. Fuentes for taking the time out of her day and allowing us to interview her. We're also grateful to those in Special Collections [at James Madison University Libraries] for giving us access to the previous transcripts from past interviews that helped make this episode possible. Our host for today was Anoush Stamm. Our interview with Ms. Fuentes was conducted by Michelle Pineda-Hernandez. Our research and content producers were Emma Knaus and Jay White, and our audio producer was Jake DeLaurier. Join us next time on the next episode of The Harrisonburg 360 podcast, where we discuss real people, real stories, in one community.

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