

# ENGLISH IMMERSION

## HHS Student Pushed Through Challenges Of Learning New Language

By MEGAN WILLIAMS Daily News-Record

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Alejandra Henriquez Molina was just 1 year old when her mother left the family in El Salvador for Harrisonburg. Molina's brother would eventually come over as well.

But it would take 13 years for Molina to make her way to the United States through a refugee organization. She arrived in time for her freshman year at Harrisonburg High School, and she spoke no English.

"I missed my family, but it wasn't safe there," Molina said of her home country. Her grandmother is still there, along with many friends.

Molina is one of hundreds of students who enter the Harrisonburg City Public Schools division with limited or no English every year. The school system is one of the most diverse in the state, and more than 75 languages are spoken by students.

While resources are available in terms of teachers and materials, it can be difficult to learn a language while trying to learn things like algebra and geography.

"I had difficult days. I still do," Molina, now a senior at HHS, said. She made friends with a girl from Iraq who also didn't speak English, and they leaned on each other to help learn the new language.

"I thought about giving up" before meeting this friend, Molina said. But she decided to completely immerse herself in English. All of her books, movies and music that were in Spanish were set aside for English books, movies and music.

Molina also started working at Mr. J's Bagels and Deli as a cashier and cook, where everyone spoke English, which helped develop her skills further and faster.

“I just started trying, and it worked,” Molina said. Talking with people was the most challenging part of learning English. Reading, listening and writing came quicker than conversing, she said.

With graduation looming in the not so distant future, Molina has been debating what she wants to do. Before leaving El Salvador, she was part of a program to become a nurse.

Although she loved the idea of being a nurse, for the past few years Molina has been a teaching assistant for a class for newcomers that she was once in. She’s also doing a mentorship in a kindergarten class at Spotswood Elementary School.

“It’s really made me think about what I want to do, and now I know what I want to do is teach,” she said.

Molina has been assisting a newcomers class taught by Ben Kurtz, an English language learner instructor for 14 years. He spent his first two years at Keister Elementary School and the last 12 at Harrisonburg High School.

Kurtz was Molina’s teacher when she first arrived from El Salvador. With new students, the focus is on introducing reading with concrete topics that students would already be familiar with, such as classrooms or family.

“It’s important not to introduce anything too abstract, in order to grasp basic grammar,” Kurtz said. Students are sheltered in the newcomer environment for a semester or a year, depending on how quickly they progress.

He remembers Molina as a very talented student who, although unsure of herself at times, learned English relatively fast compared to other students. Now as his teaching assistant, Kurtz describes Molina as “one of my favorite students,” and said she’s made the semester a lot smoother for him.

The newcomer program is constantly receiving new students throughout the school year, which presents challenges.

“You don’t know their background or whether they had an interrupted educational experience,” Kurtz said. “It can be hard to identify where they are at.”

Kurtz can have anywhere from 10 to 24 students.

In Harrisonburg City Public Schools, 95% of students speak at least one of eight languages:

- Spanish — 46%
- English — 38%
- Arabic — 4%

- Kurdish — 3%
- Russian — 1%
- Swahili — 1%
- Tigrinya — 1%
- Ukranian — 1%

There are 69 additional languages spoken by students for a total of 77.

Many factors draw such a diverse population to the area, according to Laura Feichtinger McGrath, director of English language services and Title III.

Available unskilled and semiskilled work, and available (though not necessarily affordable) housing are a couple of reasons. Also, programs such as Church World Service Refugee Resettlement, which services Harrisonburg, bring in a few hundred people each year, and individuals and families who have been settled in other parts of the country will relocate here as immigrant communities grow, Feichtinger McGrath said.

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