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Reyes, Morris's first Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence, combines teaching and community service

Summary: The Mexican political scientist approaches life from a multicultural perspective.

(November 24, 2010)-With a British husband, a bilingual son, and an international education, Marisol Reyes personifies interculturalism. Yet she describes herself as a Mexican woman. But her Mexican identity is as much about shattering stereotypes as it is about her place of birth. Having observed that most people don't perceive Latin American women as educated, she lives with intention to reframe perceptions by example.

Reyes, a political scientist, is the University of Minnesota, Morris's first Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence, spending the fall 2010 semester teaching courses in both Spanish and English. She insists that she is not really unique, but a member of a more globalized generation among Latin Americans, concerned with universal issues as human rights and the environment, and laboring to repair, rather than escape, their countries. Past obstacles are disappearing, she says, and people like her are more easily integrated into different settings. At the same time, she is more aware of her own roots and works to balance the identities of citizen of the world and Mexican national.

Reyes formulated educational goals in phases, "three stages of expansion," as she refers to them, in different environments, beginning with a bachelor of arts in international relations at Universidad Nacional Autónoma in Mexico City. One of the largest universities in Latin America, it is also one of the most radical in ideology, populated by exiles and 60s radicals. A free, state-sponsored institution, rich and poor attend and interact, creating a dynamic political scene.

Eight years later, Reyes completed a master of arts in Latin American studies at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. A Jesuit school with ecumenical bearing, it introduced her to the American political elite. Her experience proved "eye opening," revealing new subtleties of United States-Latin American relations. The two distinct experiences clinched her decision to be an academic.

As a Mexican Ministry of Education Scholar, Reyes then earned a doctorate in political behavior at Essex University in Essex, United Kingdom. Still specializing in her "passion," Latin American and Mexican politics, she gained the theoretical tools to operate effectively in the academic marketplace.

England also proved to be an informal cultural education. Her best friends were from Taiwan and Malaysia, and she connected with the Polish community. Here she first encountered the Muslim world and through its members witnessed an overlooked instance of solidarity during summer 2005 as this community, joining British colleagues, protested against the London Underground bombers who acted in their name.

Home and Family

Reyes and husband William Coffin, originally from London, met as Essex University students. Coffin, a writer, recently branched into science fiction. They make their home in Querétaro, one of the safest and wealthiest areas of Mexico. Job opportunities at multinational companies combined with a competitive private university create a diverse community, while the indigenous Otomí, a pre-Aztec people, add local color. Diversity breeds discriminating cuisine, and Reyes

enjoys cooking and organizing food-related social events. Some of her clearest memories of other cultures come from eating together, she says.

While living in Mexico, Reyes and Coffin recognize the importance of his British heritage for son Alan (3), and both continuously work on avoiding culture clashes. Some challenges come from outside the family. Querétaro is Mexico's geographical center and historical-political nexus. The city center is a World Heritage site, both for the original Spanish architecture and its role in the war of Mexican independence. Emperor Maximilian I was tried and executed there in 1867, and the signing of the Mexican constitution occurred in the city in 1917.

Given the monarchy's importance in British culture, some British visitors worry about the influence of a country that had executed its king. Modeling their own values, Reyes and Coffin believe in their ability to give their son the best of both cultures.

Adept at English and Spanish, Alan attends the Morris school district's bilingual preschool, where his British accented English has become touched with Minnesota resonance.

Teaching

Reyes's courses at Morris include Hispanic Film, in Spanish, and Leftist Regimes in Contemporary Latin America, an area of scholarly expertise, in English. It's been "wonderfully rewarding," she says. Discussing films already familiar to her with American students is revealing new perspectives coming from the students' own experiences. Reyes finds her Morris students respectful, quiet, and disciplined compared with their Mexican counterparts. The biggest surprise, she says, is having to explain things that she previously took for granted. In turn, she is learning what is important to rural Americans.

In Querétaro, Reyes is professor in international relations and humanities at the Instituto Tecnológico de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey. Considered a private university, all students pay tuition, and they expect a job when they graduate. Majors and minors do not exist at the undergraduate level, but institutions have a specific focus and hers is more business oriented. Reflecting the university's global outlook, current faculty members come from Canada, France, Columbia, and Cameroon, in addition to Mexico.

Community Outreach

An imperative informing Reyes's teaching is that the Mexican and American economies are inseparable. As she told an audience for Learning Unlimited, Morris's lifelong learning organization, "When America has a cold, Mexico has the flu." Many Mexicans and Europeans, in fact, place Mexico in North rather than South America. A troubled American economy consequently increases the flow of immigration into the United States, especially of unskilled labor, because staying at home is even worse.

As a destination for such workers, Morris is on a renewable learning curve. Reyes developed a comprehensive strategy for understanding the impact of immigration and analyzing the community's needs, in a very short timeframe making inroads among community leaders, local businesses, and the Latin American residents.

Language barriers, Reyes observes, are the main challenge. Breaking them naturally improves community relations and chances for advancement, but the population is very diverse, both in country of origin and education. Some speak only a local dialect, understandable since indigenous Mexican peoples speak 136 different languages, producing a fragmented community. Work schedules may hinder the ability to regularly attend English classes. Ironically, many local dairy farmers have become proficient in Spanish because, having received little response to their recruiting efforts in the U.S., according to Reyes, they have turned to Mexico and other parts of Latin America with notable success.

The capacity of women to grow and affect the world around them is a powerful force for change, Reyes believes. She is working with Morris faculty on providing resources for local Latina women and trying to identify an emerging woman leader among them who can take charge and empower others to be heard within their ethnic groups and in the larger community.

Reyes has a knack of being present where world history is being made. She was in New York City on 9/11 and on her way to the London Underground at the time of the terrorist bombings. Now she has made history as the first Fulbright Scholar at a public liberal arts institution in a small rural Midwestern town. But this is hardly a leap for the scholar. Her affinity with committed students and multicultural leanings, she avows, are as well nourished in Morris as in any urban center. Her visit will leave a lasting impression in the lives of all whom she has touched and on her own evolution.

Through personal and academic discovery, the University of Minnesota, Morris provides opportunities for students to grow intellectually, engage in community, experience environmental stewardship and celebrate diversity. A renewable and sustainable educational experience, Morris prepares graduates for careers, for advanced degrees, for lifelong learning, for work world flexibility in the future, and for global citizenship. Learn more about Morris at morris.umn.edu or call 888-866-3382.