

Leadership Training Was Great, Now What?

Good afternoon, my name is Leticia Rocha and I am very happy to be here today with all of you sharing my experiences as a parent leader. I was born in Mexico, lived in Canada for 5 years and I moved to Danbury two years ago. I have worked as community educator for more than 15 years in both Mexico and Canada and now I am a full time mother of a two-year old child. This year, I graduated from the PLTI class, and I am here to tell you what happens to PLTI students after graduation.

I will begin by talking about my community project, which started as a simple idea, and it now involves three PLTI alumni as well as the Language Center of the Danbury Public Library. Then I will talk about a broad description of how I perceive the work that parent leaders are doing in the community and to conclude, I will give a brief explanation of how the PLTI community is kept engaged and motivated by the work that our host organization Danbury Children First conducts in different areas of our society.

The multicultural society of Danbury provides both challenges and opportunities for the creation of a community of greater inclusion. One way to achieve greater inclusion in the Danbury community is to educate our community members by providing spaces of multicultural exchange where we can learn from each other while we develop the essential skills that are required to interact successfully. That is why in partnership with the Danbury Public Library through Language Center whose coordinator is Lesley Boruch, Shannon Cobb, my PLTI mentor, and I initiated a Program called English Chats.

The objective of English Chats is to enable mothers whose primary language is not English to develop the English language skills and the cultural skills necessary to support their children in a multicultural society such as Danbury.

Half of the group are native English speaking mothers and the other half are mothers from different nationalities for whom English is their second language. Given that none of the ESL programs in Danbury offer childcare for infants or toddlers from 0-5 years old, we created a

children friendly environment where they can play while their mothers are practicing English with the help of other mothers. We initiated this program in April and will continue next year with meetings twice a month.

During the sessions we are learning new words, discussing topics of interest for mothers with young children but foremost **we are building bridges of mutual cultural understanding**. Little by little we are working together to cross those invisible lines that maintain people from different cultures apart.

After giving you a glimpse of my community project, I would like to talk about the work that I see parent leaders do after we graduate. Well, the journey of transformation, growth and community involvement continue. After 10 years of PLTI in Danbury we are forming a group of parent leaders who share values and work everywhere in the community to improve the lives of our children.

The skills, knowledge and self-awareness acquired during the PLTI class empower us to participate in our community as agents of change. I found especially interesting to make the connection between being a full time mother of a two-year-old child and my community involvement. Before PLTI, all the community work I did had as a platform for my professional experience and being a full time mother appeared to be an obstacle instead of an asset. To realize that we as parents can transform our reality is very important and that is in part what keeps us active in the community because for the very simple fact of being parents we influence our different community environments.

We participate in both institutionalized community spaces as well as in all other informal or everyday community spaces for parents. We do community outreach **where parents are**. Play groups, play grounds, schools, churches, library, friends. We provide information for other parents, advocate for our children at Municipal level, State level and National level as well as in our everyday life. We learn that we can have an impact to transform the policies of our country for the well being of our children.

The PLTI class sensitizes us to understand more about special needs and multicultural issues and it encourages us to help to build communities of greater inclusion.

How do we do it? What keeps us going?

We the parent leaders do not work alone. We count on our PLTI community at various levels: friends, colleagues and the PLTI alumni group. The house of Children First, as my son Pedro calls Danbury Children First, creates children friendly environments and that in itself is a great benefit because it allows us to participate in its different events and to continue educating ourselves about children issues. At the same time Danbury Children First also serves as a meeting place for the PLTI alumni group. The PLTI alumni group holds regular meetings and organizes children advocacy events. The last event organized was the celebration of the 10th anniversary of PLTI in Danbury. We had the participation of more than 25 PLTI alumni all from different generations. In addition, we have a PLTI alumni e-mail list through which we keep in touch to share resources and information. As you can see the journey of PLTI begins during the 20 weeks of classes but it continues through our daily lives. Our children become aware about the work that we parents do and recently we became aware that our children are becoming PLTI children. For example 3 weeks ago at the end of our PLTI retreat, the daughter of a PLTI alumni who is now 15 years old is asking to be invited to our meetings. In closing, I will cite the words of Elaine Zimmerman, Executive Director of the Connecticut Commission on Children, and say “we are creating a movement of families that are practicing democracy”.