

profile

Raquel Rios

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I've been working with Cornell for twenty-eight years. On May 10, it will be twenty-eight. When I came from Puerto Rico, I decided to stay in New York because I saw a lot of opportunity to do something different. I was working as a nurse in Puerto Rico. My sister-in-law told me about Cornell. They were looking for CE's [Community Educators]. Now we call them CE's, but before, they were called "program aides." I decided to apply. For me, that was a big challenge because when I applied for this job, the supervisor said maybe I couldn't get the job because I was so highly qualified. But I said, "I need the job" because of the bills, from Puerto Rico to New York. I needed money. So they said, "okay," and then I applied for a job.

The name of this program was Upacatips. It was a working group for low-income families. There was a series of workshops, six or seven lessons. I was teaching them about budgeting, food shopping, how to stretch their money when they go to the supermarket. I used to go to the supermarket and teach the parents about unit pricing, how to compare prices with the labels. That program lasted maybe for three years. When the program finished because of funding, they transferred me to this program, EFNEP [Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program].

Compare 1974 to now, and there's a big difference from when I started at EFNEP. We used to do home visits. We used to go to different houses and teach

basic nutrition. So it was with only one person, the homemaker. Now we do it in a group setting. We need six to seven participants in order to do a group. We used to do seven to eight home visits a day, everyday. Now we only do two to three groups per day because we need time to travel and do records. We use the same materials, and we tell them that was a lot of knowledge and a lot of information for only one person. So for me, now it's better.

We teach basic nutrition according to participant needs and interests. Ten to twelve lessons. Just basic nutrition — and food shopping, food safety and information about parenting. They learn more about fruit and vegetables according to their needs and interests. I use a lot of visuals because some people don't know how to read and maybe write. So we use a lot of visuals: models, comparison cards, everything depends on the group. Some agencies we go to are English as a Second Language beginning programs. They're learning how to read and write. Their reading level is low, so we need to adapt whatever material it is we're going to use to that group.

When we go to the first class — that's the introduction to our program — we look around. Sometimes, according to the contact person of the agency, the group is going to need more visuals or more writing. They need to learn to write because they need to complete a twenty-four hour recall of their diet. We have to involve the participants in our program. It's not easy. So when my supervisor, Evalina, gets a request for a

Profile developed by Shana Herron and Raquel Rios

group, the contact person writes something about that particular group, what strategies we need to use to teach them basic nutrition. When we get to these agencies, some people there are willing to learn, and we can't say, "No we can't work with that group of people." So we need to adapt whatever we have according to their needs.

Sometimes, I teach some of the lesson only in English and maybe in Spanish. They need a person who speaks Spanish, I teach in Spanish. They need a person in English, I do it in English. Sometimes we have an English speaker and a Spanish speaker who doesn't speak English in the same group. I have to combine the group and do the lesson in two languages. Now I'm doing this group at P.S. 57, a Pre-K group. Evalina said, "This group is only Spanish." When I went to a parents' meeting, there were ten Spanish speakers and three English speakers, only three. The family assistant said, "Ms. Rios, please. They want to be in the program, I'll help you." I said, "Don't worry about it. Let them stay." So now I'm doing the class in two languages because the English speakers are hungry to learn about nutrition and behave so nice. Now the Spanish speakers are learning English. Whatever I say in English, they listen, and they say it back to me. And they say, "Ms. Rios, bring me the material in English because we would like to learn English also." And the English speakers like it because they would like to learn about Spanish food habits, about the fruits and vegetables. They would like to know the names in Spanish, because when they go to the supermarket they would like to try and buy things like platano (green plantain) and maybe yuca (cassava in English). All because of the group. But it's a big challenge. You have to be ready.

In some groups, the English speakers don't like to wait. When we're translating something in Spanish, they're

telling the Spanish group more than whatever you said in English. So that's a problem we have. Some groups are good. Some participants are willing to be in the group and help with the Spanish speaking. Right now, my supervisor is doing some changes in how to plan this group because when we have a translator, English into Spanish, it takes time. The class is only one and a half or two hours. We need one-half hour to clean and plan for the next lesson. We do the lesson, do the food preparation plus activities.

Because I've been in this program for many, many years, I'm ready for just

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about anything. Right now, I go to this rehab agency, Lucha Vida. The participants have had problems, like alcohol problems, and a lot of mental impairments. They have needs because their eating habits were very, very bad. They want to learn. So I used a lot of visuals, like magazines, comparison cards, and a lot of activities so that they can learn the lesson without writing or reading. We have a lot of activities: the concentration game and "Who am I ?" A lot of games. You can learn in different ways. It's not easy to teach that particular group. But they learn. It's only ten lessons, but by the third lesson, I notice that they are changing, some progress.

Some groups have knowledge. When they come to us, they gain more knowledge. Now I have this group at

P.S. 57. This group is a nice group. I have some participants who have knowledge. When I review the previous lesson, I let them come to the front and teach back whatever happened last week. And then, the individuals who don't like to stand in the front and talk, the next week say, "Oh, Miss Rios, can I review the previous lesson?" And I give them the opportunity to come to the front and talk also. Some of the participants have knowledge, but they are afraid. They say, "She knows more than me." I say "We are here. I am here to learn from you, and you're going to learn from me." I never put myself higher up. We're going to learn together.

The big challenge in the team nutrition program is to go to school and motivate the children to eat more fruits and vegetables. I went to P.S. 161 and P.S. 126 in the Bronx. The children were eating, it must have been lunch time. I came in and told them how important it is to have vegetables in our diet. Some children take the vegetables and throw them in the garbage. But I say, "No." I took my time and said, "You know, vegetables are good for you. Broccoli gives us vitamin A and vitamin C." And they say, "Why do we need vitamin A and vitamin C?" So I have to explain something about vitamin A and C in a way they'll understand. Then they'll eat the vegetable. They like fruit, but vegetables are harder. Part of team nutrition was doing nutrition with the parents. By doing, by showing them how to cook vegetables properly, we get parents who go home and try the recipe. Not only vegetables, other food that maybe they didn't like. Doing the preparation is the key to motivating people.

Every lesson, we teach how to

cook a meal. We teach about safety. We look at the recipes. If they need to use meat, we tell them about how to defrost meat properly, about germs, bacteria. When we do the lesson, I ask for volunteers to come to the front. One is going to cut the onion, and the other, the green pepper. Another combines the ingredients. So hands-on activity is another way we teach. Then they say, "Ms. Rios, I went home and tried the recipe, and my family liked it." If they don't drink milk, they say, "Ms. Rios, now I'm drinking more milk," just because I explained The Food Guide Pyramid and gave them some handouts that I use.

If they don't like the vegetable, I don't try to force them the first time. Maybe by the third or fourth time, I'll combine that vegetable that they don't like with one that they'll like. We have a lot of vegetables, and some people have likes and dislikes, so we can change people's eating habits. Some people like soda, so I can't say, "Don't drink soda." It's better to start changing their eating habits little by little.

By the ninth lesson, they come to us, and they tell us about how this program changed their life. Like reducing weight. I have some parents who are overweight, so they start cutting down on sugar, salt, fat because we explain the percentage they need daily. Sometimes, they used to put three or four teaspoons of sugar in their coffee. They cut it down maybe to two, and then to one, or sometimes none. They come to us, and they tell us the progress. And it is not only them, but the family, how the family has changed their eating habits. When we enroll a family in the program, we have a questionnaire that they complete. The first one is at the introduction, and the last one is when they're going to graduate. We compare the entry and the exit. By the third or fourth lesson, they write the changes — how often they include bread in

their meals, how they're cooking the vegetables. They're drinking more 1%, lowfat milk, or maybe 2%, and they used to drink whole milk.

I don't know what it is that makes people change. We just start teaching about cooking something simple, like Chinese fried rice. They like that recipe. They used to buy Chinese fried rice and spend a lot of money. But when we do the Chinese fried rice homemade, and when they see the ingredients — how we're going to cut the onions and green peppers and also help each other cooking... I don't know what it is. They cook, then we sit down, and we eat whatever we prepared, and we talk. We share and we pray before we eat whatever they prepared. With the other programs and the nutrition program, all together, they make big, big changes.

We give a certificate to the homemakers when they graduate from the program. Most of these participants have never received a certificate in their lives. When we present the certificate, they are so happy, not only because of the certificate, but because they've learned in those ten lessons, and they deserve that certificate.

These parents are coming to learn nutrition, but we do more than that. When they need the WIC program, we refer them to the WIC program. When they need public assistance, we refer them to the public assistance program. This program has been in the community for so many years because we work together with the community. And not only with the community, but with the agencies. Public assistance knows that we're trying to get these parents ready to go back to work, back to school, and stop taking public assistance. They know that basic nutrition prepares them for deciding what they're going to do for the future, to go back to school, to do something.

Sometimes, they have problems in

their families. We try to motivate them to go to another place that would help them do better in their lives. If their baby has asthma, we can't do anything about that, but we can refer them to another agency.

We listen. When they come to us with problems, we listen. We take time. Remember we teach only nutrition, but we take a few minutes to listen to them. Before class starts, they come to us, "I'd like to be in the program, but I have this problem..." They say it with confidence. They know whatever they say to us, we're going to keep it to ourselves. We look for some help for them, and then we teach about nutrition. But we've found a lot of problems. Marriage problems, husband, wives, their children, teenagers. They like our program, so they stay. But we have to listen first.

I'm very sentimental, or flexible. When I see the people with problems, I like to help them. I don't know what it is. It's something inside myself. Years back, I went to the Metropolitan Hospital, and I was doing basic nutrition for pregnant women. This teenager, she was pregnant. She told me that she was going to have an abortion. So I took time to talk to her and convince her to do the best for her and her family, but that it was not a good idea to have an abortion. That was her problem, but I was still thinking, when I saw her, about what would happen later. It's better to talk to her family, talk to her father and her mother. And you know what happened? She did it. She talked to her mother and her father, and she had the baby. That was years back. Once she called me and said, "Miss Rios, thank you. Because of my baby, I'm really happy. I got married." So she's in a happy family. It's difficult to explain how you feel. I had the nursing background, and I saw a lot of problems. People came to me asking for help. I've tried to combine and apply whatever I know to their problem.

At places like the rehab program, you need to be strong. Working with people with problems, like drug problems, alcohol problems, you need to be very, very strong. So those programs, they need you, and they come to you, “I have this problem.” You have to find a way to explain to them, “Think about yourself. You need to go to a social worker, also. You need to talk to them. Please go back to school. Think about your family.” They break your heart. That’s only the rehab program. It’s hard to work with them. Sometimes I feel like crying.

I remember at Lucha Vida, I had this homemaker who was a grandmother, sixty-five years old. Guess what happened. She needed money for something, and she started selling drugs. A sixty-five-year-old grandmother! She came to me, and she told me her problem. My God! She was part of that program, Lucha Vida, which means, fight for your life. Do something about your life, even though you are going down the drain. Do something. Stay alive. With this grandmother, I just listened to her. I gave her good advice. “Now, think about your life. You’re sixty-five years old, but you’re still alive. Do the best thing. Forget about what happened.” But she came to me, and she started crying about what happened in her life that she went to rehab for nine months.

I’ve been with the program for many, many years. So many things have happened. Some of my homemakers who, in 1985, were migrant workers went back to college, and now, they are maybe studying nursing, or they’re social workers. One homemaker, in 1989, took just ten classes, and then, she decided to go back to school. Now, she’s a social worker. Our program motivated her to go back to school and finish college. Not only her; I have had many, many participants who went back to school. When they graduate from the

program they ask about college, where we recommend for them to go. So then I come to Evalina, my supervisor, and she gives some suggestions about how we’re going to motivate this person to go back to school. They need a GED, and then they go to college. It’s very expensive, but they work. They go to work during the day and then to college during the night.

Many of the CE’s have been in the program before as a participant. They graduated and became a CE, and then they get the job because they have the knowledge. They’ve been through the same lessons, so they have the knowl-

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edge. We have Carida Maldonado in the Farmers’ Market Program. She was my homemaker. She worked for the farmers’ market last year as a community educator assistant, and now we need a CE, and she would like to apply. She graduated from this program last year.

My son, Reynaldo, he’s in college now. In high school, he did a biography about me. The teacher was so surprised. “Why did your mother stay working as a community educator? Why doesn’t she work at the hospital?” My son said, “My mother likes Cornell, so she stays at Cornell.”

I used to go to Metropolitan Hospital to teach basic nutrition to the pregnant women. I almost stayed in that hospital and worked with the WIC program. But I liked this program so much that I stayed. I like communication. When I realized that the job was talking and teaching, I liked my job,

and so I stayed. I could make more money as a nurse, but they gave me so many merit raises. I stayed because I liked what I was doing: teaching in the community. I combine my knowledge with the basic nutrition. When I go to this school and they ask me questions about high blood pressure or cholesterol, I apply that knowledge. Whatever I learned in Puerto Rico about nursing, I apply that knowledge to this program.

I’m a “Community Educator III.” “Three” because I’ve been in this program many, many years. I do so many things. When students come from

Cornell, I do some training. I take them outside to see how we do at different agencies. When we have new coworkers, I give them training. When people from the farmers’ market come, I have to get involved in training to some of the employees of

the farmers’ market. I do the schedule when Evalina’s not here. I schedule my co-workers. Plus, I’m going myself. I teach at least six or seven groups. That’s part of my job description. Sometimes I have to write a grade on co-workers, and then let Evalina know how they’re doing. When it’s time for the performance appraisals, I have to give some feedback to Evalina about my co-workers. I combine my knowledge with community education and supervising.

We community educators are “paraprofessionals.” I have co-workers who have been here so many years — twenty years, seventeen years — just as community educators. They have the knowledge. They go to the school or agency; they teach basic nutrition. But at the end, when they retire, they’re going to have only the money, their pension. That’s it. There’s no credit for them. They’re a community educator. That’s it — and maybe a “program

aide.” We don’t have a title like “nutritionist.” When I compare my profession with this, the community educator, it would have better for me to go back to Puerto Rico and keep on working as a nurse there, making more money. Or maybe stay here in New York and take the test and have my license and go back to the hospital. But I stayed with this job because I like what I’m doing. I’m working with low-income families, very poor, poor people. People who need us. That’s why I stayed. And then I compare a “community educator” with other people who have a master’s degree. Sometimes, my co-workers feel that they are nothing, just a community educator. But I often motivate them, “No. We are doing great.” One of our site coordinators always says that without the community educator, EFNEP would go down the drain.

This program is thirty-one years old. When we go out and teach basic nutrition, the community is eating the best that they know, and they’re healthier. They apply whatever they learn. They go home and apply this knowledge in their family. They call and request our programs. At the end of the three months, we graduate people, and then we start another quarter again. In April, we’ll start a new quarter because every three months, we go to these different agencies and do the program. We have a lot of agencies pending now for April.

Some agencies, because of the good job we’re doing, call back again for the next quarter. But we need new agencies; we can’t stay in the same agencies all the time. We need to spread the program. This program has been in the community for many, many years because we don’t stay in the same place; we try to search for other agencies.

Something I am proud of is that every time Evalina sends me to another

agency, the agencies I worked at before call her and ask, “Where’s Ms. Rios?” They miss me. Like the Boys Club. I was working at the Boys Club for eleven years, but my co-worker is doing that now because I’m doing another group. So they call; “What happened? The children ask for you. When are you coming back?” I say, “I don’t know, maybe in the fall I’ll be going back.” That made me cry because she called me at home, “Ms. Rios, what happened?”

Whenever we have a new community educator, my advice to them is, “Be Honest. Be yourself. Try to do your best. Be flexible. Don’t try to put yourself up high.” If they follow my advice, they’re going to be a good community educator because working with people is not easy.

Last Friday, I went to a new agency. Evalina said, “Raquel, this agency needs you to go and do the introduction to this program and do only one lesson, the food guide pyramid.” So I went last Friday. Guess what happened. The agency wants our program. It’s a new agency. They already called Evalina back. We’re going to work with them starting in April.

When my co-workers have some questions about nutrition or health, they come to me and say “Raquel, I need this information.” They ask me questions. So I say, “Okay, this is the answer.” They go back to the agency and explain to the participants. I had a big challenge last year. I went to immigration, and I did a presentation for the officers. I said, “I don’t know about this,” because it was in English, and I’m a Spanish speaker, and I have my accent. But when I explained the program and

asked them for any questions, they were so proud. They liked the program, and they wrote Evalina. She showed me the letter. Wherever I’ve gone, I’ve tried to do my best. Always.

Whenever we have a new community educator, my advice to them is, “Be honest. Be yourself. Try to do your best. Be flexible. Don’t try to put yourself up high.” If they follow my advice, they’re going to be a good community educator because working with people is not easy. When you go to this agency and you have twenty people waiting for you, you don’t know what’s going to happen — if they’re going to like you, if they’re going to call Evalina and say, “Please, I don’t want her. She’s not going good. People don’t like her.” Some agencies, when they don’t like a community educator, when they think the educator needs more training, they call.

Sometimes, I take my tape recorder, and I tape myself to see the mistakes that I’m making because nobody’s perfect. I come home, and then I listen and think, “I need to do this differently.” Even now, I’m still doing it. I know the food guide pyramid, but always, I go back to my lesson plan, and I try to read again. You never know the participants who are waiting for you.

Right now, I give the community educators in my group a lot of training, like how to do a presentation and how to communicate with the participants. They’re doing a good job. Some people get nervous, so I say, “When there are twenty-four people in front of you, imagine that it’s only one. You have knowledge. You have confidence in yourself. Forget it.” That’s what I do. I have confidence in myself, so I go and I try to do my best.