

Yurany Monsalve boards a seven-seat turbo-propelled airplane to commute between two teaching sites in Chocó, a coastal province in Colombia. From Monday to Thursday, she teaches English to teenagers in a beachfront classroom in Nuquí—then flies over the jungle to Quibdó, on the Atrato River, to teach university students in the Martin Luther King, Jr. Fellowship Program on weekends.



Photo by Yamile Garcia

Yurany Monsalve prepares for her weekly commute over the jungle of Chocó, Colombia.

“Life was leading me to teaching; you cannot escape destiny.”

Ms. Monsalve is from Medellín, Colombia, where she began studying English in high school. Yet it was not until she graduated that she became passionate about it. She cannot put her finger on a specific event that changed her perception; however, she thinks that having the freedom to study what she wanted and the fact that part of her family emigrated to the United States had something to do with it.

Her mother encouraged her to go to secretarial school so that she could get a good job. What interested Ms. Monsalve most during this course of study, however, was the English-language component, and shorthand fell by the wayside. She excelled in English and received the highest grades in her class due to avid self-study. “I remember going to the library and asking for basic readers in English,” she says. “I read classics like *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, and *Pride and Prejudice*. I would memorize verbs and have my sister quiz me. And I listened to music and wrote down the lyrics.”

Bolstered by the success of advanced English study, Ms. Monsalve applied for one of 30 spots in the Foreign Language and Translation

program at the University of Antioquia in Medellín. If successful, she would be the first in her family to attend university, something she had long dreamt about. She was rejected twice, but the third time proved a charm. She described the day she received her acceptance as “one of the happiest days of my life.”

In addition to her diligent study habits, she attributes her acceptance to the foundation of the nonprofit Diafora, which she created with friends from high school and which lasted 15 years. Diafora’s mission was to provide cultural activities in the Las Estancias neighborhood, where Ms. Monsalve grew up, and give the residents alternative perspectives on life. Diafora designed workshops and seminars for both adults and children in art, literature, reflection, and memory. Ms. Monsalve led reading groups, an experience that gave her a taste of teaching with a social purpose.

Although she was now fulfilling her dream of studying English at university and leading workshops, she still didn’t see herself as a teacher. “Life was leading me to teaching; you cannot escape destiny. But if you asked me



Ms. Monsalve in front of her Access students in Nuquí, Chocó, presenting a story

Photo by Dania Valdés

“I want to listen to you. Everyone is important in this class, and you have beautiful things to say.”

back then, I would never say that I wanted to be an English teacher,” she recalls.

During the summer of 2008, Ms. Monsalve went abroad for the first time, with the International Camp Counselor Program, to work at a summer camp in a suburb of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She not only gained proficiency in English, but her view of American culture changed dramatically due to the generosity and kindness of her host family and others she met there. She remembers that “this experience was not only about learning English. It also allowed me to see the multiple stories that make up the United States.” It was such an impactful experience that she returned the following summer.

After Diafora came to an end, she was hired three years ago by Centro Colombo Americano Medellín (CCAM) as a part-time English teacher. CCAM is a binational center that carries out many U.S. Embassy initiatives,

such as the English Access Microscholarship Program and American Spaces, while also serving the community as a language and cultural center. “Working at the Colombo was something big for me because it is the top language institution in Medellín,” she says.

In January 2017, CCAM’s Academic Department announced that it was recruiting adventurous teachers for a new program in Amazonas. Ms. Monsalve was chosen to spend a month teaching indigenous girls in the English for Girls program deep in the rain forest in Leticia. This program provides leadership skills and workshops in women’s empowerment, with English as the medium for learning.

Since this was a completely new program, the girls struggled with English, so classes there went at a slow pace. A teacher friend who was one of the first to work with the girls told Ms. Monsalve, “They have to learn English, but, more importantly, they need to be heard.”



Martin Luther King, Jr. Fellows present work on learning strategies as part of their final project in Quibdó, Chocó.

Photo by Juan Carlos Moreno

**“You see small changes, but important changes.
It’s like the revolution of small things.”**

This advice struck a chord with Ms. Monsalve. She realized that she had to do something different. She wanted to share her passions for English and women’s literature with the girls. Therefore, she compiled a booklet of short comics about the lives of inspiring women such as Frida Kahlo, Sylvia Plath, Malala Yousafzai, and Anne Frank, which she read to the girls. One girl was so inspired by the story of Anne Frank that she went to the local library and checked out *The Diary of Anne Frank* in Spanish to read on her own. Ms. Monsalve also asked friends to send short videos speaking about their lives as women leaders.

A further challenge was hearing some of the girls’ voices. In Leticia, girls born in indigenous communities tend to speak very softly. “I remember one girl who never spoke,” says Ms. Monsalve. “I told her, ‘I want to listen to you. Everyone is important in this class, and you have beautiful things to say.’ In the very next class, the girl started to speak. The others mentioned that they had never heard her voice.”

Although Medellín, a big city, had afforded her many opportunities, the small city of Leticia allowed her to make an impact. Ms. Monsalve says that the girls were appreciative of everything she brought and that they value teachers a great deal: “In a place like this, you see small changes, but important changes. It’s like the revolution of small things. The girls feel valued and listened to.”

CCAM’s Academic Department was so pleased with Ms. Monsalve’s work that they offered her another opportunity, this time in the isolated province of Chocó. She jumped at the chance. Now she would divide her week between the Access program in Nuquí and the MLK Fellowship Program in Quibdó, both programs providing English and leadership training to youth in low-income areas who are indigenous or Afro-descendant.

Ms. Monsalve had been told that the high school students in Nuquí could be loud and were not motivated to learn. After her experience with the soft-spoken girls in Leticia, she wasn’t sure how she was going to deal with this new situation. So she told herself, “No matter what, literature is going to be my lifesaver.” Reading to the students aloud proved to work. “Although they like to speak and often disrupt the class,” Ms. Monsalve reports, “they listen carefully when I read. They pay attention when they are motivated. If you want to learn something, it has to make you feel alive or connected to the activity.” Daily, she reads to them the colorful picture books of Eric Carle and Anthony Browne.

She also tried other strategies. During one of her classes, she asked the students to write letters to the MLK Fellows she taught on the weekends. On a normal day, most of the teenagers did not stay for the entire class. On this particular day, though, they stayed 30 minutes after the class, motivated to write to older college students from the capital city. Another strategy was introducing music. “People in general love music,” she says, “but the students here love music 100 times more!” She put on music in English while they were working, and they would spontaneously dance and sing along, especially to “Happy” by Pharrell Williams.

For their first project, Ms. Monsalve took her students to the beach, where they prepared an exhibition about the places, animals, food, and things to do in Nuquí. The students displayed and presented their posters for a public gallery walk under the shelter on Playa Africana. Among the exhibition’s visitors were the school’s principal, a representative of the Ministry of Education, police officers, and others from the school and local community. This was one of the first times her students had a chance to use English for a real purpose.

And this is just from Monday to Thursday. On Friday evenings and Saturday mornings, Ms. Monsalve works with the college-aged MLK Fellows. She feels that the MLK program is an exemplary social project and that she learns a lot from the students. She explains, "They are very young and active, and they really value their city. They feel empowered and like working with social projects within their own communities." For example, for Christmas 2017, they collected gifts to deliver to children in an impoverished place, where one of the students grew up. Ms. Monsalve explains, "Students feel proud of being part of this program. They value every single activity. They are committed to their classes, and they want to learn to move forward. It's just fantastic."

No sooner did Ms. Monsalve complete her two months in Chocó when the Access coordinator asked her to return for another two months. It isn't easy living and working in Nuquí due to the lack of materials, clean water, and dependable Internet connectivity. "Why did I go back?" Ms. Monsalve ponders. "I see learning English as an opportunity to help students open their minds to different people, countries, and cultures. Education

is the path to achieving their dreams, and English can help them along that path, teaching them values and social skills."

Ms. Monsalve would like to get a master's degree in cultural diversity, literature, or women's studies. Whatever the future holds, she says, "I would like to continue to work on social projects with women and reading. ... Having the opportunity to study is a responsibility because you should share what you have learned with others. I am very grateful for my family because I am who I am because of them and have had such wonderful experiences. It's a double process: I can give something of what I have, but it's more about what I receive. I feel alive when I work with social projects."

This article was written by **Wendy Coulson**, a 2017–2018 English Language Fellow in Medellín, Colombia. She trained teachers in Teaching Young Learners and Special Learning Needs and worked with students in the MLK, CHOP (College Horizons Outreach Program), English for Girls, and Access programs at Centro Colombo Americano Medellín, the binational center where she met Yurany.

