

Luis Zarate *Making the Transition from Student to Teacher*

Like many immigrants, Luis Zarate had a difficult time adjusting to life in the United States. In 1993, at nineteen, he came here from Peru with very little knowledge of English. His uncle was aware of Westchester Community College's reputation for serving more than 4,000 English as a Second Language (ESL) students. He brought his nephew to the Valhalla campus and enrolled him in a basic language course.

From there, Luis progressed through the ESL program. His growing English skills led him to Iona College, where he took business and Spanish courses, eventually earning a Bachelor's degree in Spanish. Shortly after, he secured his current position as a client relationship management associate at the Tremont Capital Management financial services firm. Then he took his education in a different direction.

He decided that he wanted to help others with limited English skills. While continuing to work full-time, he went on to become a part-time teacher and has now come full circle. Once a student,



he now teaches three night and weekend ESL courses at Westchester Community College.

"I know what it's like to be in a new country and to be unable to communicate," he says. "I try to be friendly and work with my students to build their confidence. Unless you have confidence in your ability to speak and write in the language, you won't be able to communicate."

"My favorite student was a woman in her sixties who couldn't speak a word of English. She was 'adopted' by the class and became like a grandmother to all of us," he says. "I was able to teach her how to use basic conversational phrases. One evening, she came in and told us all that she had cancer and was going back to Mexico for treatment. I hadn't heard from her in a while, but then she sent me a greeting card in commemoration of Teacher's Day (a Mexican tradition). She told me that she was doing fine and she wanted to thank me for all that I had done for her. I was proud that it was partially written in English."



Luis Zarate (pictured above, and at left with Robert Nechols, director of the college's English Language Institute) serves as a role model for students who seek to improve their language skills.

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