

Adriana Solís-Black

Article by Anna Fritz

The heat and humidity of the tropical rain forests of Costa Rica are far removed from a cold winter day on the high desert of southern Idaho, but Adriana Solís-Black doesn't mind. When she left her home in San Isidro for a new life in Idaho, she traded a dry and rainy season for winter, summer, spring and fall. She left behind a Spanish-speaking culture for an English-speaking one. She gave up volcanoes for foothills. But more important than what she left behind is what she brought with her: a tradition of strong, independent women. Adriana was raised in a matriarchal group made up of her mother and aunts. "There was nothing they couldn't do," she said. "They could fix anything and they were economically independent. And they raised me to be the same. The work I do, I do in their honor."

That work includes her college career at Boise State University, where she studies Spanish language and literature and multi-ethnic studies - a curriculum that will aid Adriana in her work with migrant and refugee communities and her activism for social justice. Adriana married a homegrown Idaho boy and made the journey from her homeland to his in 1997. She learned English while working at her mother-in-law's child care center in New Plymouth. "I learned English from the kids," she said. "It was the best way to learn because they were so open."

Adriana and her husband, Zack, later moved to Glenns Ferry, where she was a bilingual teacher assistant working with migrant children and teaching English as a second language. She taught night school and summer school, went out on home visits and interpreted during parent-teacher conferences. She didn't realize it at the time, but she was a role model for her students, especially the girls. She met with a group of them last fall at Boise State, now high school juniors in town for a campus visit. They told her she made a difference in their lives, and they wanted to be like her. "All I did was let them know that if I can do it, so can they. I'm just like they are: female, a person of color, an immigrant. I'm no better than they are. So what's to stop them?"

Adriana has spent her career as a voice for those who aren't heard because of language barriers. Besides teaching English, she has advised Spanish-speaking clients about debt issues, translated documents to Spanish and interpreted for refugees. She is a board member of the Women of Color Alliance, is a member of the Progressive Student Alliance, and the Organización de Estudiantes Latino-Americanos. A McNair scholar, Adriana will use her fellowship to conduct research on the Cuban-American community in southern Idaho, studying how they assimilate and achieve the "American dream." Then she'll head off to graduate school for a degree in social work or American studies. Ultimately, she wants to work with migrant populations.

She was particularly inspired by the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), a human rights organization of farm workers whose members were on campus last fall to protest the name change that turned the Boise State Pavilion into the Taco Bell Arena. Protestors opposed the renaming amid allegations of unjust labor practices for farm workers harvesting tomatoes, particularly in Florida, for various Taco Bell restaurants. "The cause of the CIW - ending slavery - and the impact of the CIW people who came to Boise State, just seven of them, made such an impression. Their passion really moved me." As an activist, Adriana is willing to play any part in a group she believes in and to perform any level of work to get the message across, whether she's an organizer, a "go-fer" or the "face" of the group. She feels a passionate need to be involved and enjoys the accomplishments of activism. She is stubborn, she says, and once she steps on a path she always forges ahead. "I do what I do without thinking of my role or how I am," she said. "I just act."

Her life is interwoven with human rights. Whether she's out with friends or walking with Zack, talk always turns to politics, human rights and justice. "Adriana is constantly furthering the cause of equality among men and women of all races," said Heather Strepke-Durgin, who works with Adriana at the Boise State Women's Center. "She always voices her beliefs when presented with the opportunity. Anytime she is asked about things going on, she has the answer... in English or Spanish."

Although Adriana lives far from Costa Rica, she continues the legacy of those independent women in San Isidro, living her life with passion and commitment.