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Volunteer-Turned-Employee Reaches Across Language Barriers

The stars aligned when Abby Téllez found her way to us in 2021.

She had just graduated from Washington University in St. Louis and was preparing for the LSAT. A regular at the restaurant where she worked encouraged her to gain legal experience before law school and pointed her to IIP.

The suggestion made sense. Abby has always been interested in public service law. She started volunteering and now works in case intake and as a translator for Spanish-language applications, and client and family communication.

Abby's desire to advocate for underrepresented and vulnerable populations is in her DNA – literally.

"My Dad was a political refugee," she says. "The regime had targeted his family, so they fled from Nicaragua when he was 5 and made it to the United States when he was 13. No one spoke English."

Abby has personally seen how people in vulnerable situations – especially young, non-English speaking immigrants – end up at the mercy of the criminal justice system. One of her family members has been unjustly imprisoned for Abby's whole life.

During a recent visit with the Spanish-speaking mother of an innocent client who has been imprisoned for 17 years, Abby translated questions and answers for our investigator. She is diligent about her work knowing that tiny word changes between languages can make all the difference in how an individual and a case are understood.

Translating across dialects and regional variations of Spanish, especially slang terms, can be challenging. If she's uncertain about how to interpret a word, she has direct access to a Spanish-language expert – her Dad, now a Spanish teacher and fully fluent in English and Spanish.

"A big part of translation is humility," she says. "If you don't know the word or tone, it's not fair to assume you know what they're saying. Being able to say 'I don't know' is important."

Abby starts law school in the fall and intends to become a public defender. At IIP she has learned what can go wrong at trial and lead to a wrongful conviction, especially for non-native English speakers caught in a system operating in a language they do not understand.

“I’ve seen what brings cases to our office and how difficult it is to reverse a wrongful conviction,” Abby says. “I want to prevent this from happening in the first place.”