

Dear FLANC and Alexandra C. Wallace Essay Contest Committee,

My name is Natalia Toledo, and I am a junior at Albany High School, where I have studied Spanish, earning a 5 on the AP Exam last year. I am the co-founder and current co-president of the Albany High School Interpreters, a service club that translates pamphlets, stories and recipes from English to world languages, such as Spanish, French or Mandarin, for various senior centers and community groups. Language has always played an enormous role in my life, and I was very excited to find out about the Alexandra C. Wallace Essay Contest. I am sending you my essay entitled, "To My Family." Thank you for sponsoring this event and I look forward to finding out the results.

Best Regards,

Natalia Toledo

Natalia Toledo
Grade 11
Albany High School
Teacher: Pamela Lim-McAlister

To My Family

I have spent my entire life surrounded in a whirlwind of cultures. As a child, I spent a lot of time with my grandparents while my parents were at work. It is a concept that seems simple enough, but actually, I grew up very confused. My mother's family is Hong Kong Chinese and my father's family is Salvadoran. Neither of my grandparents spoke English fluently. Whenever I was under their care, it was always a game of charades, trying to understand what they were telling me and for them to understand what I needed. I grew especially close with my paternal grandmother, who lived in the same house as me. We spent a lot of time together, whether it be sitting in front of the television watching *Dora* or drawing pictures of Disney characters. We did not really speak that much, and for a while, that was enough.

However, things started to change. From the moment that I could pick up a pencil, my parents did their best to teach me how to write and read in English. Sadly, this newfound discovery of words began to complicate my relationship with my grandmother. I began to grow frustrated when she could not understand me, a fact that I am ashamed of to this day. I regret the times I got angry or cried because she didn't know what I was saying. She tried her hardest to accommodate me. She practiced reading books in English to me. She asked me what words meant so that she could remember them in the future, especially food. She tried her hardest to learn English from me, for me. In the process, I ended up learning so much from her.

I cannot say I remember how or when it happened, but one day, I just had the realization that I could speak Spanish. It was neither good nor organized, but it was something. After I had that, everything changed. Instead of being the one doing the talking, I could listen and learn. In doing so, a variety of doors opened to me that were not there before. For one, I could finally communicate freely.

Being multicultural and multilingual is not only useful in understanding the world around me, but it also defines who I am. In embracing the whirlwind around me, I was able to gain access to many different experiences, such as learning how to make Salvadoran dishes with my abuela, such as *pupusas* and *pastelitos*. In addition, I was able to appreciate the significance of

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traditions, such as the Lunar New Year and Mid-Autumn Festival. There is a big difference between observing different cultures and traditions as an outsider and truly understanding them as a person who has experienced them as part of the community. My knowledge of world languages and cultures has bridged the gap for me, augmenting my abilities, opportunities and enjoyment to connect, communicate, and celebrate with family and friends. Language has helped define who I am, a proud Chinese-Salvadoran-American.