

Litzi Valdivia-Cazzol

Power Autobiography

I couldn't define what the word "translation" meant when I was young even though I started translating as early as Pre-K. I was doing it for my parents so that I could be informed on everything - especially when it came to school for my brothers and I.

Translating for my parents felt was normal. It was normal that we didn't have staff at schools to make it their job to translate because of the lack of funding. It was normal for me to have to be present at parent and teacher meetings. It was normal that I had this huge responsibility on me on top of being just a kid in school.

No one bothered to step in and make it their job to see what could be done so I didn't have to keep translating during conversations that I shouldn't have had to be a part of. This happened until I went to Ballou High School.

Ms. Erazo already knew my older brother (who was a sophomore at the time and transitioning into his junior year) when she met me. She recognized my brother for being an excellent, academically performing student who was always engaged in school activities and was well-known.

I, on the other hand, was so quiet. This quietness came from my early childhood when responsibilities were so often added to my plate that my childhood stopped. I didn't engage in so much out of school time programs except Writing Club when I went to Hart Middle School because it was the only program where I felt understood. Ms. Nancy, the teacher of the club, was also okay with the fact that I could only attend if I could bring my younger brothers with me.

I loved writing. So I was more than excited when Ms. Erazo introduced our AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) class to Ms. Kathy, the founder of Shout Mouse Press. Ms. Kathy understood that we needed more stories to be shared outside of AVID class and with other students at Ballou. So, when the Ballou Story Project came out, Ms. Kathy offered "office hours" during our lunch period to work together AND she and provided pizza! And who doesn't love free food?

The project supported my work as a writer, so much so that I soon became a co-author amongst other students at just 14 years old. It was my first (but certainly not my last) published book. I realized then that I wanted to be in a community where we want everyone could engage in these opportunities and we must eliminate any barrier from making it happen. All it takes is to be given the opportunity to be a part of something amazing, and that's what happened with Ms. Kathy.



Years later, I had the chance to volunteer at my old elementary school. Through the experience, I built many relationships with second and third graders while supporting their reading and writing. It was so rewarding to tell them about the amazing opportunities that Ballou gave me, especially the opportunity of becoming a co-author of a published book at the age of 14. It was even more rewarding to see their excitement and hear their ideas for what kind of books that they wanted to write one day.

I believe that we shouldn't have had to prove we were worthy of opportunities to change our lives. Everyone has a voice that must be heard and when they are, they can lead to great change that support ourselves, each other, and our communities.

I continued being involved with my communities and work to build relationships with my peers to ultimately get out of my comfort zone and engage in more activities that better my skills. I want to continue leaning on support systems I've created through relationships I've already made. And I know that through my work as a PAVE Community Organizer, I'll continue making comfortable, empowering, and supportive spaces to support parent leaders across DC, just like Ms. Kathy made for me.

