Learning Other Worlds:
Magdalena Herdoíza-Estévez

Magdalena Herdoíza-Estévez’s contributions to international education are wide ranging. The Ryan award committee noted several. She has helped design the educational systems of several Latin American countries. Her efforts on behalf of non-English speaking students have had a lasting impact in Southern Indiana. For more than a decade, she has taken IU students to urban and rural areas of Ecuador each summer and in the process formed a lasting bond between the IU Southeast (IUS) campus and a Quichua village in the Andes Mountains.

The IUS Summer in Ecuador course begins on campus where students study Ecuador’s culture and education and prepare lessons that they will teach abroad. The group flies to Quito in June. Students live with host families and teach English language, health, and a variety of other subjects at schools in the area. They then travel to Paquibug-San Gerardo, a small Quichua village deep in the Andes Mountains, where they complete service learning projects, assisting in and out of the village’s classrooms.

The annual visit has become the occasion for celebration in San Gerardo, an integral part of the life in the village. Students have planted trees, painted classroom murals, and brought books, musical instruments, and teaching supplies. IU Southeast contributed a complete computer lab to the community. Not just her campus, but also Herdoíza-Estévez’s family have become involved. Upon graduating from IU, her daughter Isabel spent a year in San Gerardo. She and a friend helped the women of the community revive an ancient local tradition weaving baskets. They assisted in developing a local organic quinoa farming industry,
which continues to thrive. Her son, Francisco, and his wife, both dancers with the Colorado Ballet, worked with two IUS participants and additional members of the Colorado Ballet to bring a dance program to the village, a highlight of the 2015 program.

To date, more than 160 students, many of whom were travelling abroad for the first time, became part of and contributed to a world that many Americans never see. Many of these students have brought their skills to schools in Southern Indiana and beyond, working especially in the area of English learning for immigrant students. Others pursued majors in international studies or worked abroad. Two former students have resettled in Ecuador.

Herdoíza-Estévez’s own exposure to unfamiliar worlds began at a much earlier age. When she was five, her family moved from Ecuador to Paris. She started kindergarten there with no knowledge of French or the ways of her peers. “It was hard at first, but I also experienced the beauty of learning another language quickly (as children do), getting acquainted with the culture and the city, and having friends from different places. It made traveling natural to me.”

Returning to Ecuador three years later, Herdoíza-Estévez followed an international academic path: elementary and secondary education in Ecuador; a high school year in Portland, Oregon; university study in Ecuador, then Italy, and back to Paris. She studied art, then education, then sociology and economic development.

In Paris, she began an affiliation with the United Nations that was to continue in various forms for decades. She first joined Ecuador’s delegation to UNESCO in Paris. At the invitation of the Haiti minister of education, she worked on a national plan for education in Haiti. She later designed...
Ballet and dance in the Andes Mountains. Francisco Estévez teaches a village child.

curriculum reform in El Salvador, led the evaluation of the Guatemala Mayan education plan, and advised universities in Honduras.

It was her husband’s career that finally brought her to Indiana. Milton Estévez won an international music contest that brought him to Louisville as a representative of South American music. His Apuntes con Refrán for orchestra and electro-acoustics had its U.S. premier in 1992 by the Louisville Orchestra. A short stay in the United States—“good for the children to learn another language and environment”—became a longer and longer one. Milton became composer in residence at the University of Louisville. Magdalena continued her international consulting from an office at the University of Louisville. She took a position in the School of Education at Hanover College and took her first group of students from there to Ecuador in 1998. When a position opened up at IU Southeast, she was attracted to its public status and larger size and has taught there since 2000.

Soon after arriving on the IUS campus, noting the impact of the international on the local, Herdoíza-Estévez developed what is now the New Neighbors Center. It began with a small grant from IU Southeast and was expanded by a $1.1 million federal grant in 2007. Its purpose was to provide training and resources to Southern Indiana K–12 teachers who had immigrant children in their classroom. “It started at Parkwood School in Clarksville, Indiana. At the time, many teachers did not know what ESL meant. We brought resources and trained teachers, principals, and counselors. For several years, there was just a handful of non-Spanish international children. Now there are 30 languages represented in some schools. The program began with four Latino students; now Latino children make up half of Parkwood School. At Parents Night last night we met with 28 families.” Today, the New Neighbors Center has steady partnerships with a dozen schools.

Herdoíza-Estévez will lead one more group of students to Ecuador in the summer of 2016. She plans to retire to Ecuador and hopes to find a new leader for Summer in Ecuador. “There’s a shared experience in the program that is difficult to communicate. It needs someone who has the conviction and love for the work and who understands its impact and its potential.”

The Ecuadorian government has made Herdoíza-Estévez a Prometheus Scholar. She is spending the fall semester in Ecuador working with universities to develop a national policy for mainstreaming of equality in higher education. She hopes that when she eventually retires to Ecuador, IU will use her as a resource to cement stronger partnerships. She has already assisted IU faculty wishing to do research there and has helped students obtain internships. “Quito is an important academic center for Spanish-speaking Latin America. I will be exploring the possibility of including Indiana University in a government project that sends teachers to the U.S. to improve their English teaching and speaking skills. I would really like to see outreach from IU to Ecuador and would like to be instrumental in that effort.”