

Below is a conversation between BDL Managing Director of Programs **Marisa Suescun** and BDL debaters and Suffolk BDL Debate Scholarship winners **Dayana Ulloa Serrano** (Brighton High School class of 2024) and **Gabriel Ponce Lemus** (Everett High School class of 2024).



**Marisa Suescun**



**Dayana Ulloa Serrano**



**Gabriel Ponce Lemus**

*This conversation was edited for brevity and clarity.*



This is kind of this cusp moment - you are on the brink of graduating high school, but not yet in college. It's such a momentous time. I'm curious how it's been for both of you in this moment.



It's been exciting, but at the same time scary. Because I'm scared to enter college and - scared of the future and everything that is coming. Right now I have my (high school) finals, so I kind of have some anxiety about that.



For me, I already finished school. I don't have any stress with school work. I'm very excited to go to Suffolk. Yesterday, I chose my classes and I am really excited for Intro to American Politics. I'm excited because I want to enter a new chapter.



Can you tell the broader BDL community a bit about your high school experience in general, who you are as a student, as a leader, and as a person beyond school?



I feel like this year I have done the most. I took 3 AP (Advanced Placement) classes, and also I took the dual enrollment class at Suffolk. I was trying to be involved in many things. And I feel like debate guided me through this path because it helped me to overcome my fear of trying all those new things that I didn't want to try before. And now I was excited to try it because I knew that they could bring me opportunities and new experiences.



What's something new you tried that you wouldn't have before?



Right now, I'm the president of my school.



Oh, my goodness! That's right! I learned that through reading your scholarship essay.



Yeah, I feel like I would never have done that before. I was like, no, so much stress!



And now you've done it!



Yeah! And also, just taking hard classes because I always kind of doubted myself. But I just tried it. And now I am like, it wasn't that bad.



What does your family think about those accomplishments - you being president, you being a leader of your debate team?



I feel like they are very happy because they always encourage me to try new things and to do new things. They have always been so present in my education and in my life for me to succeed. I came to this country five years ago. I came with my mom, I think it was in November of 2018, from Honduras.



I like to think of myself as someone who challenges myself a lot. Like, I took 4 APs (Advanced Placement classes) this year, 8 in total. So I always like to take the most challenging coursework. But I also like to involve myself in the community. For example, this year, I became the treasurer of the Everett Youth Initiative Council, where we gave six scholarships for \$3000 each. And I've also become the president of the Spanish National Honor Society, which is very exciting for me because I got to teach people about my culture, Hispanic culture. Because most people in that society are not Hispanic, so they get to learn a lot.



That's interesting. At Everett High School, most of the students in Spanish National Honor Society are not Hispanic?



Yeah. Literally, my vice president, secretary, and treasurer, they're not Hispanic. I'm the only one there.



Wow. So they must really value you bringing that perspective in.



Oh yeah, definitely. And of course, I've done Spanish debate, where I'm the captain. And I have two cousins who, their Spanish growing up has been poor, but they've been bettering themselves and they want to continue next year to better their Spanish skills and public speaking skills.



Are they going to join the debate team?



Yeah. Like I did, sophomore year.



Which you also wrote about. I was not one of the people who decided on the (Suffolk BDL) scholarship, but I have to say it was such a gift to be able to read your essays, both of which were very beautiful and wise and insightful in sharing about your journeys. So, I'm curious for

both of you, when you think about being a debater, how did that shape your identity or how you showed up in the world differently as a result of that?



I like to think being a debater shaped who I am. Because now I try to advocate more for things that I believe are right. And I also like to hear different opinions because sometimes I'm not right even if I think that I am right, so I feel like being at a debate helped me to understand different points of view and also to advocate for other people that really need it.



Before becoming a debater, I felt like an outsider. Only because I'm Hispanic, but I was born in the US. And some people will say that if you're Hispanic but you're born in the US, then you're not Hispanic and it made me feel like, what am I? Am I American? Am I Hispanic? What do you view me as? But when I joined the Spanish debate team, I found that people accepted me for who I am and they wanted me to improve my Spanish. Like, (BDL alumni and current Suffolk students) David (Rivera) and Marcela (De Souza), they worked with me when they were at Everett High, so I could improve my Spanish and practice how I pronounce words. So that's why I really value my experience in Spanish debate in the BDL, because I got to better my Spanish and get to feel like I'm part of a community and family.



Could you tell a favorite story of your time as a debater?



There was a moment where Jian (Ping Li, my debate partner and co-captain) and the coach (alumni coach David Rivera) were running around because Jian wanted to paint his face with the paint. And they were running all across the space where we were making the sweatshirts.



My favorite memory would be the last tournament, where I got to see two teams from Everett compete in the Novice finals. And three of the four finalists were from the US. So that means that more people from Everett that were born here were trying to connect with their roots and better their Spanish through Spanish debate. And next year, our goal is to bring more people who are Hispanic Americans to debate. Because we feel like a lot of people in Everett who are like me, who were born here, they don't really speak Spanish that well. So we would like to build a community where we get to better ourselves step by step, in every practice and every tournament. And maybe one day we can have someone win Varsity for Spanish debate from Everett.



You were close this year. You both made a run of it.



Can you say a little bit more about what first drew you to debate - what was the moment that first drew you in?



I was at lunch with my friends, and two of them were talking about the case they were debating that year, and I was like, "What are you talking about?" And they said, "Oh, it's just something about debate." And just hearing them mention it again in every lunchtime, I was like, "I want to know what it is!" At first, it was just a club in the morning for people interested in hearing arguments, not necessarily to enter the debate team. And (Brighton debate coach Ramon) Trinidad was just so persistent about me entering the team. And I was like, "Ah, OK!"



He can be persistent.



(laughing) Yeah, he is.



For me, sophomore year, I took regular Spanish, not even honors or AP. And I had Ms. (Everett debate coach Ruth) Cardona as a teacher. And I remember this one time, she pulled up a poster of Boston Debate League and told the class, "If you join the Spanish debate team, I'll give you extra credit for the next class." I really wanted that extra credit, so I signed up for it. I ended up loving it. And I found that my Spanish wasn't as bad as I previously thought. Because growing up, I didn't really have a lot of practice with Spanish.



In these next questions, I'm going to ask you to think about your future. Once again to both of you, congratulations on being awarded the inaugural Suffolk BDL debate scholarships! How did you find out that you had gotten the award, and what was that moment like?

I just woke up and saw (the message on) my phone. And then I came running into my mom's room and I was like, "Oh, look!" And she was just so happy about that. And then she called my dad, saying "She won the scholarship!"



I had a tennis match that day. I remember when I opened the email, I was on the school bus on the way to my match. And I remember telling my cousin who was on the bus next to me, "Look, look, I won it!" And he was so excited. He was screaming. And when I got home, I told my mom, and she was obviously very happy and very excited for me. Because going to college for free is insane.



How does it feel to be sitting in this campus? Which is a campus that you've debated in countless times. And knowing that in September you'll be first year college students here, how does it feel?



I am very excited because it's close from home and I don't have to drive for hours. I'm excited that it's close to the State House, and there's interesting opportunities over there. No negative energy.



I'm also excited that I don't have to travel far. I'm also excited because I'm already used to these buildings and being around this place, downtown Boston. I'm happy to know that I will stay here because I like this environment and the university.



It's nice to have that familiarity, in addition to the unknowns. To know that you belong in a place. As you think about the next four years and beyond, what are your hopes and aspirations? What do you wish for yourselves?



My goal, after undergrad for political science, is to go to law school, to maybe one day become an immigration lawyer. My dad had TPS, which is Temporary Protected Status. So that means that my dad isn't a US citizen. You have to apply for it every 18 months. He got denied the application for it to be renewed, and the US government did not give him an explanation why he was denied. He would go to immigration lawyers and they didn't know why he got denied. So I want to become an immigration lawyer one day to fight for people like my dad.



I feel like I'm still undecided. Right now my plan is kind of (similar) to Gabriel - political science and then going to law school. Or maybe political science and education. Because something I want to do is help people in my community. I came five years ago here. I know the struggle that people like my parents, people like me, and people around my school (have). So I want to be able to help people - like being a teacher, to be able to help people to go to college and to have opportunities that many people cannot have right now in the country. And if I become a lawyer - maybe, I'm not so sure! - also to help people, like Gabriel's parents or my parents or people in my community that really need the help.





There's a lot of synergy in your goals - certainly a connection of both wanting to help people. You also are going to get to be on the Suffolk debate team next year. When you think about that, what are your hopes and fears?



I feel like I'm scared. As always! (laughs)



Scared is good!



Yeah. I'm scared, but I'm just excited to try new things that I haven't tried before. The thing that scares me is the language barrier as always, because when I came here, I didn't speak any English. Right now, I speak English, but sometimes I have trouble pronouncing words and phrasing some sentences. So I'm just scared, but also excited because if I try new things that will help me improve myself as a person and in the English language, and also as a critical thinker.



I am very excited. It's my first language, so I feel like it's going to be easier for me to debate in English than in Spanish. And I have a friend (fellow Everett High School alum Gabriella Paniagua Castro) who's also going to Suffolk, and she agreed to be my debate partner.



Oh, cool! Also from Everett High School, on the debate team?



She was! She made it to the semifinals for Novice.



For a final question - who has been your inspiration or mentor?



My biggest inspiration would be my mother. Even though she doesn't speak or understand any English, she's always trying to advocate for herself in anything, so I feel like I have learned a lot from her from that. And I want to be like her because she's always so enthusiastic and excited about many things, that sometimes I don't find that enjoyable, but she always finds that excitement for those things, so I'm like, "Oh, why?" (Laughs) There are many barriers that can prevent us from doing those things, but she always tries. So I try to be like her.



I feel like I've gotten a lot of mentorship from (my debate coaches), Ms. (Ana) Kolokithas and Ms. (Ruth) Cardona. I didn't have a freshman year (because of Covid), so my first year (in person) was sophomore year, and my homeroom teacher was Ms. Kolokithas. So, all of my high school life I've known both of them. Even though I didn't have Ms. Kolokithas for an actual class, she still had people practice Spanish words. So I felt a sort of attachment because not every teacher does that, even in homeroom. And I've had both of them as my teachers and they've seen me grow. They spent time with me just so I could practice my Spanish skills. So I felt like I grew as a person in those three years that I've experienced with Ms. Cardona and Ms. Kolokithas.



I'm sure they'd be honored to hear that from both of you. Congratulations on your leadership, your incredible contributions to the Boston Debate League, and for earning the scholarship. We look forward to you continuing to be in the BDL family as alumni.