

Message from 11-12 Oregon Teacher of the Year Elena Garcia-Velasco on Receiving The Order of Isabella the Catholic from the the Ambassador of Spain

On Friday, January 25 I received the Cruz de la Orden de Isabel la Católica from the Ambassador of Spain, D. Ramón Gil-Casares. The Order of Isabella the Catholic is a Spanish Civil Order of Merit that, according to the Spanish Ambassador, “was created in 1815 to recognize the work, dedication, talent, and above all the loyalty of Spaniards and friends of Spain.” The Grand Master of the Order is Juan Carlos I, King of Spain. Some of the individuals that have been awarded the Cruz de la Orden de Isabel la Católica in the last few years include: Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes, Mexican singer Chavela Vargas, Colombian artist Fernando Botero, Chilean president Michelle Bachelet, Mexican president Felipe Calderón, and Governor of Puerto Rico Luis Fortuño.

Even though this cross is awarded in all walks of life, the four of us receiving it on this occasion were educators. The ambassador recognized this year’s recipients for our professional accomplishments and for our contribution to strengthening the relationship between Spain and the US. Specifically, he thanked us for teaching Spanish in the US, the second country in the world with the biggest number of Spanish speakers, after México and before Spain.

The ceremony was very personal and intimate, with attendees from the Spanish Embassy plus a handful of guests from each one of the award recipients. One by one, the Ambassador first spoke a few words about our work, and then the Spanish Delegate of Education, Xavier Gisbert da Cruz, read the certificate and declaration from the King of Spain that was presented to us along with the Cross. After that, each one of us had the opportunity to say a few words of gratitude.

Witnessing the imposition of the cross, I had with me representatives from my Spanish family and my American family, as well as friends and colleagues from Roosevelt. Overwhelmed by the size of the honor I was about to receive, I had agonized for days searching for the words that would appropriately match the magnitude of the occasion. Once at the ceremony, looking at the faces of those who had traveled all the way to DC because they knew me, and those who were there without knowing me at all, I was completely overtaken by a deep sense of gratitude.

In trying to explain the personal meaning of this cross for me, my first words were for Oregon, my home. Having had the honor of a full year of representing Oregon as its Teacher of the Year, I expressed how receiving the Cross of the Order of Isabella the Catholic from Spain, was a perfect way for the year to close, making a full circle. I spoke of myself as an immigrant like so many others in the US, with two motherlands, the one where I was born and raised (Spain), and the one that had received me with open arms (the US). Even though externally my motherlands are two, they are merged inside me as one. That evening, they had also converged at the Ambassador’s residence, where we were all gathered for the ceremony.

Back in 1998, during the second year of my teaching career, my parents gifted me the Dictionary of the Royal Academy of the Spanish Language. On it, they wrote a note exhorting me not to ever forget my first language. During the ceremony I had the opportunity to honor my father’s presence by quoting his words from the dictionary. I wanted him to know that the significance of their present had not been lost on me. I also wanted to express my deepest gratitude and appreciation for the excellent education I had received in Spain and that was expanded upon later in the US. In my work today as a Spanish Language Arts teacher to native English and Spanish speakers I have come to realize that part of my shared responsibility is to help others maintain and develop their Spanish language skills so that they too get a fair chance to reach their full academic potential as bilingual scholars.