

**Claire Darmstadter**

Hey everybody. I'm so lucky to be joined today by Yanci Almonte Vargas, UW-Madison sophomore and graduate of Madison Memorial High School. Thank you so much for taking a couple minutes to chat with me.

**Yanci Almonte Vargas**

Of course, no worries. It's my pleasure.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah. So first it would be great if you could just give us a really general overview of your educational and linguistic background and what you're studying here at UW.

**Yanci Almonte Vargas**

So I am a student at UW-Madison, a sophomore, like you mentioned. I am studying global health with certificates in Chicano/Latino Studies, and African Culture Studies. And I am also on the pre-med path. And my linguistic background, I could say started when I moved to the United States, when I was 13 years old. That's when I started to become a bilingual person, I guess. I had always learned a little bit of English, but Spanish had always been my first language in the Dominican Republic. And it wasn't until I came here when it was a necessity that I had to become bilingual and master English.

**Claire Darmstadter**

So let's first start with your involvement with Green Card Youth Voices, a wonderful book that I really recommend anybody checking out. Can you just kind of talk about your involvement in this project and what the purpose behind it was?

**Yanci Almonte Vargas**

So the purpose behind the whole project because the book is part of a series by a nonprofit called Green Card Voices. And basically, their whole purpose is to stop stereotypes and stigmas around immigrants coming to the United States. And they dismantle the stereotypes and stigmas by presenting the stories from the immigrants themselves, how they got here, that whole journey and how they've been here in the US. So they are first person narratives. So it was just me responding to some questions about my story. And it is in a book format. They also have videos where they asked you the questions, and then they transcribe the questions into text. So it was pretty liberating and empowering for me to do, just, you know, getting to see your story out there, in your own words, not, not from different lenses of stigmas or stereotypes, you know. And the process really started when I was in high school, to be honest, I was a senior, I believe, and this opportunity came to me because of a teacher. And the teacher reached out to me because the two years before that we had talked about one of their books, that book that came before. And this book was with high school students from Minneapolis. And then they reached out to us after they saw that the school was so interested in that first book, and they were like, Okay, so we're trying to make another book, including Milwaukee students and Memorial students. Number of high school students. So like, would you guys be up for it? And then my teacher reached out to me after they reached out to her. And that's how it all started.

**Claire Darmstadter**

And you feel like through that process and that project, you learned a lot more about your fellow students at Memorial, was it perhaps languages that you didn't hadn't had contact with before? Or did you pretty, pretty closely know those students already before that whole thing started?

**Yanci Almonte Vargas**

I would say yes it helped me to get to know them better. And no, I did not know them, like, I guess more intimately because for most of them, I just saw them around the school, we would say hi, just because I think I was very involved in high school. So I kind of knew a lot of people. But I would say I did not get exposed to so much as the languages that I spoke. I got to know that they were from different parts of the world, and that they spoke different languages, that there was a wide variety but I to tell you like hey, this is the language that they spoke, I would not be able to.

**Claire Darmstadter**

And can you talk about some of those other activities you're involved in high school? So did you feel like you were really included? Did you have to make a really strong effort to be involved in other activities, and was language ever a factor where you're a little bit uncomfortable, especially in the first couple years in the US if your English wasn't as strong as perhaps it is now?

**Yanci Almonte Vargas**

Yes, I was very, very uncomfortable. The first years. And to be honest, I had always been a shy person until like three years ago, like almost when I was about to leave Memorial. So like, the beginning of my junior year is when I really started speaking up for myself, and really speaking in English, because I knew English since I came here. And that was in eighth grade. But like, after that, I knew English, I could read it, I could write everything. But I was so shy that I never spoke it. So I would say that yes, I was very uncomfortable, the first years in that I really did have to work to be involved. Just because what I perceived from the principles at Memorial High School, they were not very, I guess, motivating for students who were bilingual, you know? They saw, especially Latinos, they saw that you cannot advance forward, because it will be too big of a challenge. So, and I'm talking from like a real story where one principal really just did not want not just me, but other students to not really, for example, go from regular classes, to more advanced honors AP classes, just because he didn't think that he that they could do it, because it was too big of a challenge. And it was not something that just happened to me, it was something that every student and every other teacher knew, especially those of the ESL program, which he was part of. So I did get to take those advanced classes because I switched principles. I mean, what was I involved with, I was involved with so much. So talking about Green Card Voices. In my school, we do an all school read, where we choose a book every year, and then the school gets, like about 1000 copies, however, many students that are in the school, and they used to distribute that to all the students. And we talked about the book in all the English classes, topics, themes, we have speakers, a lot of different events around those topics that the book centers around. So I was very involved with the first book that came to

Memorial High School. And then with the second one. I was also very involved with a green club that I had in my house, my high school, I was also involved in our POC motivation group that we had. I was also very involved in AVID, I was an AVID student, so I was part of the AVID Council. And I was also part of BYFY, which is By Youth, For Youth, a United Way volunteer program. And then I'm trying to think but there were a ton more things, but I just can't remember right now.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah, it seems like you're very busy. And I think it was important what you mentioned about how perhaps on the administrative side, you didn't necessarily have support or your languages weren't necessarily viewed as an asset. But then through working with Green Card Voices, it was kind of like we can lead discussions with the school and we could show all the rest of the student body, how incredible stories and skills and backgrounds we have. And so I think it's interesting looking at that contrast between the school like, hey, you know, we're not going to support you in the classes you want to take. But then when we can use you to have like an all school read, then you suddenly become an asset. And so I think that's important, but I can imagine how frustrating that must have been. So I also was wondering if you could talk a little bit about language courses in high school. So most students are told that in order to go to a four year university, you need to have to link two years of language classes. But as somebody who came to high school already speaking an additional language besides English, were you kind of forced or required to take a Spanish class or another language, or how did that kind of work with your situation?

**Yanci Almonte Vargas**

Well, from my situation I took an AP Spanish class for one, one year, I think. And that was about it to be honest. And I think because in my high school, it wasn't like that, like it was about a year that you had to take up language, or you didn't have to take language at all. I think it was an option. I could be wrong. Or it could have changed. I do not remember exactly, to be honest. But the fact that I spoke Spanish did not exempt me from having to take the language, if that makes sense. So I did have to take an AP Spanish course. And then I took the AP test, and I think I got a five. So then here at UW-Madison I don't have to take a language.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Do you feel like when you were in that AP language class was it something where it's pretty easy, and you just had to, like speak the language that you grew up speaking? Or is it sometimes like, wow, they're asking for vocabulary that might be from Spain, or it's just not how we say things, or they want me to come up with this verb structure, that just like I never think about, because I'm a native speaker of the language. Was it pretty difficult or was it pretty easy?

**Yanci Almonte Vargas**

I think it was easy in the sense, you know, like speaking it, but then writing in and like specific vocabulary, like you mentioned, it's like, it all just comes so naturally, that you don't even think about it. So that was really challenging. And I think, rejuvenating, because I had not studied

Spanish for like, what, since I came here, when I was 13. And I was like 19 at the time. So it was very rejuvenating, you know, and a growing experience definitely.

### **Claire Darmstadter**

So now you're a student on the campus at UW Madison, but also grew up in the Madison area, at least for the latter part of your teen years. Can you talk a little bit about what it's like being in the setting? Do you think that Madison is pretty hospitable to individuals who speak a non-English language? Do you ever feel like there's kind of the vibe that you shouldn't speak Spanish? Or that you're going to be discriminated against because of it? Or is it a pretty supportive environment?

### **Yanci Almonte Vargas**

I think answering the first question, I think that it is a hospitable place. To a certain degree, I think that, you know, there's a lot of effort in diversifying and bringing different people, and that's why they have the Multicultural Center. And they have like the Chicana/Latina Studies program, and those are places to feel safe in. But that doesn't mean that I necessarily feel safe or hospitable in the entire university, you know? Because there is a whole, it's like a whole body of water. And you will find very different kinds of fish. And there's, it's like, the majority of this fish are from a certain group of people. And then there's like this 25 maybe like 50% of this other group of people, which is people of color and then like. So I think that yes, and no. It depends if there are people of color around me, I guess. And that is pretty dividing thinking, but it is honestly how we feel sometimes because you never know when someone might be like, maybe you should speak English, when you should be free to just speak whatever you want if it isn't bothering anybody you know. So that's just something that, for me, I do not feel safe doing it. I will do it anyways, but you know that it can be expected. Like just based on everything that always goes on in the US. And I think it's just the norm at this point to be like that is very sad, but it just feels like that sometimes.

### **Claire Darmstadter**

And I think that dichotomy that you brought up was important because you talked about all those great centers and resources and groups on campus. And you can kind of get inside that bubble where everybody supports language diversity. It's like, Oh, this is great. Like, I'm really gelling with these people. But then you have like a gen ed class or you go into a campus space where it's just kind of like everybody all together. And sometimes you forget that like, Oh, wait, everybody isn't as supportive and inclusive as when I'm with those communities. And so I think that's important that you brought that up. So one more metaphor, I know, you just use the fish one, but we tell little kids all the time that it's a superpower to speak more than one language. So can you give me one reason, you can answer in English, in Spanish, a mix of both, whatever you want, why it's a superpower to speak more than one language?

### **Yanci Almonte Vargas**

I mean, I think right off the bat, it is, I think, a superpower because it can open to many networks, many connections with people who speak the language, the second language, I mean, or trying to speak that second language, the culture that is attached to that language, the

food, so I think it is, I guess I would, I don't even know how to put it, but it definitely helps you make more connections to something bigger than just yourself. And then second, I would say it is a resource. Because when you are applying to a job, or like, you know, there are different jobs that require you having multiple languages or a specific second language. So I think that is financial, and almost like a job skill to be honest sometimes. So I think those are the reasons, but the biggest one being culture and like the amount of people that you can meet because of that same second language, and the connections that it can open up for you. And the opportunities and possibilities. Like you can travel to a country that speaks our language and learn from that culture and probably lived there. And change something, revolutionize that place.

**Claire Darmstadter**

What's not to love. Right? Well, thank you so much. I appreciate you taking a couple minutes to chat with me. I know the end of the semester is very busy, but your perspective is very valuable. And I will leave links to the book and the website below so people can check out Green Card Voices. It's just an incredible group doing some incredible work. So thank you so much.

**Yanci Almonte Vargas**

Thank you. Thank you.