



Anita Gallegos

BY Victoria Osborne

Anita Gallegos came to the Oregon Child Development Coalition as a 21-year-old looking for summer employment and the opportunity to help take care of children. Now 34, she's the area administrative assistant in the organization's human resources department.

"Multitasking and being helpful come easy to me, and I really enjoy doing it," Gallegos said. "My bilingual skills always came in

handy growing up — whether it was translating for my dad at a doctor's appointment or anything in between.

"Sometimes, people would see you at the pharmacy and ask, 'Hey, can you help me?' And you'd say 'Absolutely!', because you understood what they're going through.

"At the time, I didn't see it as any kind of special skill, but it's been essential for the work I do and I'm incredibly thankful for the

opportunities I've been given along the way."

During this year's summer enrollment, 166 migrant families turned out for admittance into the peak season program, 86 more than the program could accommodate. Gallegos said she and many other OCDC staff were working 12 to 14-hour days throughout the enrollment process.

"I have to be very organized," Gallegos said. "I do everything from interviews and reference checks, to working directly with families and employees to resolve conflicts, to conducting orientations for large groups of people."

Gallegos, the second oldest of five siblings, said she considers herself a "third-tier mom," and took to her initial roles as preschool teacher's assistant and later family advocate, both of which turned out to be just the beginning in her now almost 13-year career at OCDC.

"Family has always been very important to me and I do tend to be the mom of the group," she said. "At home, I just always seemed to be the head of the bunch and the one in charge of cooking and cleaning."

Although at first she describes herself as being shy and wary of the spotlight, according to her supervisor, Gallegos has challenged herself to take on increasing leadership roles over the years.

"It's amazing what you can do when you have a good team to work with," Gallegos said. "I grew up here, so they've seen me take on new responsibilities and have been there to support me to grow and be able to do what I do today.

"They believed in me before I did. My fear tends to get the best of me sometimes, but I think I've gotten

better and better at setting it aside and gathering my courage to move forward."

The Dalles area's peak season program works to provide free childcare for migrant parents working around the clock during the annual cherry harvest. Its doors opened to children ages infant through preschool on June 23 this summer and were concluded earlier in July.

According to the latest tally, around 305 children have been placed in this year's program.

"We go from having 70 year-round employees to needing to have about 200 in a matter of three or four weeks," Gallegos said with a smile and wide-eyes.

"Can you call it a beautiful chaos? I guess you can. You just go through it day by day and the activity just flows around you.

"Since I started this position in 2008, I've been learning through trial and error, seeing what works and what doesn't and taking what I know to make the process that much better next year."

"She gives way too much credit to other people for her accomplishments," Jennifer Ericksen de Heredia, Hood River and Wasco counties, OCDC program director and Gallegos' long-time supervisor.

"The reality is that there's no other program in the state that operates quite like this and it's really challenging to stay on top of everything. All of her success she's achieved on her own. The rest of us see how amazing it is to have her on our team and know this place wouldn't be the same without her."

"This program is so short and the hours are so long that I think taking the extra step to get to know

people, acknowledge them for their hard work and let them know you appreciate the fact they show up every day is very important,”

Gallegos said. “All it takes is stopping, setting everything aside for a minute and really listening. It’s all about communication; making sure everyone is comfortable and that no one feels lost or unheard.”

Gallegos said she has grown and blossomed at OCDC.

“When you first start, you’re not necessarily very confident in yourself, but everything’s worked out, little by little. Slowly, before I even knew it, my confidence in my own abilities grew and the wonderful guidance I received over the years nurtured me into becoming who I am today.

I definitely consider myself very blessed.” ■



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