



Photo by STEVE MITCHELL

'I feel like I'm 25 years old already,' says Diana Cortes, an eighth-grader at Jeaga Middle School who interprets for her Costa Rican parents, Lucia (right) and Israel. She also helps their friends decipher bills, immigration paperwork and tax forms. 'But it's kind of like a gift to be able to help someone else,' she adds.

# ¿Comprendes, Mamá?

**They're only kids, but they're dealing with doctors and landlords, translating tax forms and battling utility companies. ►**

By CARA NISSMAN  
Special to *The Palm Beach Post*

Lucia Cortes felt frustrated and terrified.

She had rushed her daughter Alex to the emergency room when the 9-year-old's body had broken out with crimson bumps. The scene was chaotic. Gurneys clanged, patients moaned and mumbled, and nurses hit her with a flurry of questions.

"How long has she been sick?"

"What did she have to eat?"

"Does she have any allergies?"

But Lucia stood dazed and silent, in tears, as the searing white lights shined a spotlight on her confusion. Lucia doesn't speak English.

Fortunately, her daughter Diana was by her side.

"My mom couldn't explain that my sister was allergic to the new paint on our walls, so I had to," said Diana, 13. "I can't get a job because I'm too young, so I feel this is a way I can be there for my mom. I feel that I'm useful to her."

Like Diana, many children of

South Florida immigrants often find themselves in very unchildlike roles. Because they speak English and their parents don't, they are called upon to navigate everything from telemarketers' calls to tax forms. They ask the questions at department stores and groceries. They accompany their parents to the doctor's office and to state agencies. They deal with utilities companies and landlords, and they help their families survive in a world their

See INTERPRETERS, 6E ►

**► When parents don't speak English, their children often find themselves with unchildlike responsibility — and power.**



# Child interpreters often forced to behave as surrogate adults

► INTERPRETERS *from IE*

parents often don't understand.

"I see it all the time," said Marigdalena Rodriguez, a family service specialist with Head Start in West Palm Beach. "Parents don't want to go anywhere alone, because they're afraid that if someone talks to them in English, they won't know how to answer."

Palm Beach County and many others nationwide have made significant strides to ensure that immigrants receive professional interpretation. The area's public schools offer multilingual interpreters and handouts, Florida courts are required to provide interpreters, and many health care workers provide language liaisons and telephone language lines.

Despite these provisions, the reality is that many immigrant children lead lives of constant flip-flopping — not just between their native tongues and English, but also between the world of children and the realm of adults.

Is that good for the kids, or is it asking too much? On the plus side, children who translate home communication skills, develop dependability and learn patience.

"A lot of children, when they come to us, they don't have a real sense of belonging," said Mary Jane Ford, manager of the school district's Migrant Education Program. Translating in adult situations "builds their self-esteem, because they're making a contribution to their parents and to their school."

Young interpreters also can become conscientious students and good leaders, comfortable with people of all ages, but the task can mean a lot of responsibility for kids who aren't ready for the fast-track to adulthood.

"A lot of children feel so overwhelmed," said Rodriguez. Kids often miss school and miss out on activities with their friends. "Parents put so much hope in them, and most of the time it's the only thing (parents) can do."

Children also learn to take advantage of their parents' ignorance. A popular ruse for Spanish-speaking students faced with a failing grade is to swear to their parents that "F"

---

**A popular ruse for Spanish-speaking students faced with a failing grade is to swear to their parents that 'F' stands for 'fantástico.'**

---

stands for *fantástico*, says Bitto David, a Palm Beach County school district spokesman.

Judy Pierman, director of education at the Hispanic Human Resource Council in West Palm Beach, recalled a little wise guy who duped his mom at an open house by turning his teacher's criticism, "Your son talks too much in class," into the compliment, "Your son participates well in class."

Seeing how easily they can fool their parents causes many kids to lose respect.

"Many children think they can reprimand their parents," said Rodriguez. "They say, 'You be quiet, Mom, because you don't know.'"

And it can be dangerous to depend on a kid in serious medical and legal situations.

"A child at a doctor's appointment might omit information about their parents' medicine allergies," said Sonia Williams, an interpreter and translator who heads Global Translations and Interpretations in Boynton Beach. "In a domestic violence situation, a child might want to protect the (accused) parent from the police."

Still, there are happy endings. Guerlie Belizaire, who interpreted as a youth for her Haitian parents in Belle Glade, now helps others as a family counselor at the Haitian Center for Family Services.

"I felt like I was the adult, like I had to make all the decisions. I got to be very mature," said Belizaire, 30. "I decided that I knew where I was going and what I wanted out of life. I'm giving back."

*Cara Nissman's 2003 Journalism Fellowship in Child and Family Policy, based at the University of Maryland, supported research for this report. Contact Cara Nissman at [cnissman@jkraft.net](mailto:cnissman@jkraft.net).*

# ¿Comprendes, Mamá?

'I don't want anything to happen to her.'

## Wilky Exantus, 13, Belle Glade

The angry cashier pointed at the money in Ynaya Exantus' hand and at the items in her cart. People in line behind her rolled their eyes and shook their heads.

She knew they were angry, too, but she didn't understand. Had she done something wrong? Did the cashier want her to put back her groceries?

"It was a very embarrassing, stressful situation," Exantus said through interpreter



Wilky

Rolland Nicolas of the Haitian Center for Family Services in Belle Glade. "Wilky wasn't there."

Wilky is her 13-year-old son, a tall, buoyant ninth-grader at the Alexander W. Dreyfoos Jr. School of the Arts. Without him along to convert English into Creole, even the simplest of errands is fraught with uncertainty for Exantus, a migrant farm worker who lives in Belle Glade.

"I don't want anything to happen to her because she can't speak English," says Wilky, who often accompanies his mom on doctor's visits and shopping trips.

"Lots of times, I get very discouraged," Exantus said. "I want to be able to buy stuff on my own and communicate without the assistance of somebody else."

She may not need Wilky's help much longer. Last fall, Exantus started nighttime English classes at Glades Central Community High. She expects to do well, especially because she has a live-in tutor at home.

"I giggle when she says Cadillac wrong," Wilky says. "She says, 'Ladelat.' But if she says a word in English wrong, I just correct her and she says it again until she says it right. She's practicing, and I'm happy for her. It'll be good for her to be able to go to places on her own. She won't get confused or lost."



Photo by STEVE MITCHELL

Rosa Pedro translates a medicine bottle for her mother, Maria Mateo, in their home in Lake Worth.

'I make sure to go with my mom so she gets what we need.'

## Rosa Pedro, 11, Lake Worth

Winding her way past other families, a cacophony of languages crashing against her ears, Rosa Pedro entered a caseworker's office at the Department of Children and Families recently and relayed her mom's request.



Rosa

"We needed food stamps," said Rosa, 11, a petite, pensive girl who lives with her parents in Lake Worth. "I make sure to go with my mom so she gets what we need, because she doesn't understand what most people say."

Rosa often misses school to interpret for her mom, Maria Mateo, who fled war in Guatemala with her husband, Miguel Francisco, and daughter more than a decade ago. Maria and her husband, a migrant farm worker, speak the rare Mayan dialect Conjubal.

"I really hate missing school," said Rosa, a fifth-grader at South Grade Elementary.

"We learn a new lesson every day, and I miss it. I want to learn."

The FCAT was a recent crisis. On the day of the test, Maria had to take her infant son, Sebastian Tomas, to the clinic. Hunched over her desk, Rosa agonized more over what might happen to them without her there than whether she'd pass the English portion of the exam.

"I knew I couldn't miss the test," she said, "but I didn't want her to make a mistake about the time of the appointment or give the baby the wrong amount of medicine" because she can't read the prescription.

Mateo regrets keeping her daughter out of school but hasn't found an alternative.

"It breaks my heart, because I want my daughter to get her education," she said through Maria Miguel of the Guatemalan-Maya Center in Lake Worth. "If I could find somebody else to help, I would. But there's only my daughter."

'I feel like I'm 25 years old already.'

## Diana Cortes, 13, West Palm Beach

Diana immigrated from Costa Rica with her mom and dad a decade ago. She interprets for her parents, Lucia, a teacher, and Israel, a carpenter, and also helps their friends decipher bills, immigration paperwork and tax forms.



Diana

She is most protective of her mom. On a recent jaunt with her to an electronics store, Diana confronted a store manager twice her size about an impolite clerk who had ignored them when they sought assistance. Cortes

stood beside her gesticulating daughter, proudly watching her transform her words into an angry argument for respect.

Diana, an eighth-grader at Jeaga Middle School, has been flicking on her adult switch since she was 8, when a police officer pulled

her mom over for driving without headlights. It was up to her to explain that they knew the headlights were broken but they planned to get them fixed soon.

"I was so nervous," she said, "but I did what I had to and he let us go."

She's proud to help, but she doesn't deny that there is a downside. She says she can't "just be a kid," because "if I act like a kid, people won't take me seriously." When she interprets, she said, she inhabits an older soul. "I feel very developed, like I'm 25 years old already."

Diana hopes to integrate interpretation into her future as an attorney for people who are "too poor and helpless."

"It's kind of like a gift to be able to help someone else," she says. "There's always going to be someone in this world who will need interpretation."



'She not

## Humberto Gutierrez and Orlando Gutierrez of West Palm Beach

"She failed!" said Humberto, his head in his hands. "I blame myself partly. There are too many laws. We try to look them up, but they're kind of hard to explain."

Humberto and Orlando recently found out that their mom, Neisis Santeban, failed her first attempt at the Florida Real Estate Exam. The boys had been drilling her on related laws and terms for more than a year.

"I don't know why it didn't pass," Orlando shaking his head. "We studied so much."

The boys, sixth- and seventh-graders at Cotton Middle School, have been interpreting for their mom on trips to the mall and market since they were 6 and 7. They also have spent countless evenings on the couch, looking to their mom reading children's books such as *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Knowing It*, *George and the Magic Bean*, *and the Three Bears* as she struggles to learn English.

"This porridge is cold," Santeban read tentatively. "This porridge is hot."

## MIELE VACUUMS

## DON'T WORRY

Palm Beach County

COME IN AND SEE THE NEW MIELE VACUUM



Lifetime Service and 20 Year Extended Warranty On all Miele Vacuums

# má?

Profiles by Cara Nissman



Humberto  
(left),  
Neisis and  
Orlando

‘She inspires us  
not to give up.’

## Humberto Gutierrez, 12, and Orlando Gutierrez, 11, of West Palm Beach

“She failed!” said Humberto, his head in his hands. “I blame myself partly. There are too many laws. We try to look them up, but they’re kind of hard to explain.”

Humberto and Orlando recently found out that their mom, Neisis Santiesteban, failed her first attempt at the Florida Real Estate Exam. The brothers had been drilling her on related laws and terms for more than a year.

“I don’t know why she didn’t pass,” Orlando said, shaking his head. “We studied so much.”

The boys, sixth- and seventh-graders at Conniston Middle School, have been interpreting for their mom on trips to the bank, mall and market since they were 6 and 7. They also have spent countless evenings on the couch, listening to their mom read children’s books such as *Curious George* and *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* as she struggles to learn English.

“This porridge is too cold,” Santiesteban reads tentatively. “This porridge

is too hot. Ah, this porridge is just right.”

The brothers, football fans who immigrated with their mom from Cuba eight years ago, make sure she goes over words such as *porridge* several times so she can pronounce the “r” just right when she reads the stories to the preschool students she teaches at the Iglesia Adventista del Séptimo Día in West Palm Beach.

“We just want her to take her time and do her best,” said Humberto. “We encourage her to keep on working hard so she has a chance of getting a better job.”

Until then, the three are already studying for her next attempt.

“We’re confident in her,” Humberto said, putting his arm around his mom. “And if she fails again, she’s going to keep on trying. She inspires (us) not to give up.”

“Just like a child trying to learn how to walk,” said Santiesteban, “I have to keep trying.”