

Paulina Llorente Gonzalez

*A Passion for Education
& Helping Others*



Paulina Llorente Gonzalez, an international student from Mexico, is studying Early Childhood Education.

When international student Paulina Llorente Gonzalez first came to Middlesex she had no idea what to expect, but it didn't take long for her to find a home away from home.

Originally from a small town outside of Cancun, Mexico, Llorente Gonzalez discovered a passion for helping others early. While she was in high school, she volunteered at a local horse therapy farm for people with disabilities, working mostly with people with Down syndrome. She also wrote a research paper about the positive impact horse therapy has on children with Down syndrome.

"I had an idea that I wanted to study special education," she said. "But after graduation,

I just didn't know what I wanted to do, so I took a year off to explore my options."

In 2012, Llorente Gonzalez came to the U.S. to work as an au pair. After completing her contract, she wanted to continue her education, so she stayed living with a host family in Concord.

"I have always loved school," she said. "I saw that Middlesex was close to where we lived, so I decided to apply to see where it would take me." In the fall of 2014, she enrolled in MCC's Early Childhood Education Program.

During her first week on campus, Llorente Gonzalez immediately connected with students in the Inclusive Concurrent

Enrollment Program (ICE) – a dual enrollment opportunity for high school students with severe intellectual disabilities.

As she was waiting to jump on a trampoline at a campus-wide event, she noticed a student with a disability waiting too, so she invited him to join her. An educational coach saw this interaction, told Llorente Gonzalez about the ICE Program, and asked if she'd like to get involved. She immediately responded, "Yes! Where do I go?"

Llorente Gonzalez now works as a Peer Mentor for ICE.

Peer Mentors in the ICE Program take on similar roles as other peer mentors on



Llorente Gonzalez is a Peer Mentor in the Inclusive Concurrent Enrollment (ICE) Program, helping high school students with intellectual disabilities adjust to the college environment.

campus, she explained. “We help ICE students transition to a college environment – helping them with their homework before or after class, have lunch, go to the gym, and just spending time socializing on campus,” she said.

Started in 2013, MCC’s ICE Program is supported by a state-funded grant awarded to Middlesex in partnership with LABBB (Lexington, Arlington, Burlington, Bedford, Belmont) Special Education Collaborative and Bedford Public Schools. Grant funds support creating inclusive environments for students to succeed academically, personally and professionally.

In addition to having access to Peer Mentors, ICE students receive specialized enrollment, registration and academic advising, community-based employment and career support, and educational coaches. ICE students have full access to MCC clubs, student activities, the Fitness Center, and academic and support services.

“When people find out what I do, they will often say to me, ‘Oh it is great students with disabilities have an opportunity to go to college.’ But I don’t see it as an opportunity – it’s their right,” she said. “Being a Peer Mentor is considered work, but to me it’s just spending time with friends.”

Working with ICE students inspired Llorente Gonzalez to start a student club. In the fall of 2015, she founded the ICE Program Peers (ICEPP) Club on campus. The club currently has about 12 members – a mix of ICE students and ICE Peer Mentors. Llorente Gonzalez serves as president, and an ICE student serves as vice president.

“A lot of people think it’s easy to start and run a club,” said Llorente Gonzalez. “But this isn’t your typical club. There are a lot of things to consider. Going outside a normal routine can be very challenging

for people with disabilities. Planning activities takes extra time and thought, but that’s the interesting part.”

Among the first ICEPP activities held were two end-of-semester pizza parties. “It was a chance for ICE students and Peer Mentors to get together to discuss the semester and celebrate their success,” she said. “ICE students got to showcase their artwork and final projects. A lot of people participated, Dawn Gross, ICE Program Coordinator, and Susan Woods, Associate Dean of Student Support Services, were there, as well as educational coaches, friends, and my advisor. It was really fun.”

For Llorente Gonzalez, the best part of working with the ICE Program is the relationships that form between ICE students, herself, and other students on campus.

“I’ll be hanging out with ICE students and some of my friends will come up, introduce themselves, and then in a few weeks I’ll see ICE students and my friends hanging out. That’s the best part,” she explained. “They build true and natural relationships between one another without my assistance. It’s really rewarding to see ICE students having a true college experience just like everyone else.”

After graduating this spring, Llorente Gonzalez plans to continue her education to pursue a degree in special education. She is considering working with people living with autism or Asperger’s syndrome.

“Middlesex helped me realize that I definitely want to work in special education,” she said. “ICE students inspire me. I want to learn all I can, so I can apply it to helping them.”

– Tura Linderholm