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*Translation into English of the article “Una Nueva Oportunidad”( A New Opportunity) by Felipe Lagos. The article was published in the Washington Hispanic on January 2011 featuring Wendy Mejia, RN, former participant of the **Foreign-Trained Health Professionals Program** of the Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services known today as the **Welcome Back Center of Suburban Maryland**. The original article in Spanish is available at the following link: <http://washingtonhispanic.com/nota6856.html>*

## **A New Opportunity**

By Felipe Lagos, Washington Hispanic

*Wendy Mejía was part of the pilot group for the Latino Health Initiative’s Foreign-Trained Nursing Professionals Program. Here, she tells her story.*



“Like everyone, when I came here to this country, I worked as a babysitter, cleaning houses, or waiting on tables in restaurants,” says Wendy Mejía, recalling those days in 1998 when she had first arrived from her home country of Honduras.

But in Honduras, Wendy had been working as a nurse, and for years here in the United States, she longed to return to her profession. She was unable to do so, however, because she didn’t have the equivalencies and credentials she needed to get a job in her profession.

"I don't want to denigrate the jobs I had when I arrived, but I said to myself: I studied for so long, I have a high school and a college degree in my country and it's all come to nothing. As a woman, my life was good because I was with my husband, but my professional life had stagnated," she recalls.

Everything began to change in 2005 while she was working as an interpreter for La Clínica del Pueblo. It was there that she found out about the Montgomery County Latino Health Initiative program for foreign trained nurses, known today as the "Welcome Back Center."

Wendy applied and was soon accepted into the pilot program. Of course, her effort involved making many sacrifices while she had to study to get her credentials. "There were so many problems," Wendy recalls. "I had to stop doing a lot of things. I hardly saw my daughters. I wasn't spending enough time with my husband or taking care of my house because I was working eight hours a day Monday through Friday, and then I had to hurry and pick up my daughters, help them a little with their homework, then cook, and finally study till two or three in the morning. The next day it was the same thing all over again."

Mejía says that the hardest thing during the transition was learning English and adapting to the work culture of nurses in this country.

"I don't know if it's just the area I'm working in now, which is intensive care, because before in Honduras I was working in emergencies, maternity, labor, and delivery, but I feel like nurses have more responsibility here. Surprisingly, the language used in the profession was the easiest thing for me. I don't know why, but it wasn't hard. But, the culture is different, you know. Here, medical services are very different," she says.

Eventually in June 2006, she obtained a position at Holy Cross Hospital, and since then, she's been working in what she loves doing. "I am very grateful to God and to the Latino Health Initiative for this program," Mejia says.

"Right now, I'm working in the Surgical Intensive Care Unit. What I like the most is the emotion and the adrenaline rush, seeing how we can help the patients pull through in an emergency situation. Sometimes we have serious emergencies, like when a person stops breathing or their heart stops, and we have to give the necessary care to keep the patient alive until a doctor arrives. The nurses are really important in that sense and we should be recognized for this because we are at the patients' side 24 hours a day," she explains.

When asked what message she would give to health professionals who would like to get their equivalencies and practice in the United States, Wendy Mejía says: "the only thing I would say to my colleagues who are participating in the Welcome Back Center and to those who are working in, or wanting to work in a hospital, is to not give up hope and to do everything you can. Because when you are able to get your license, many opportunities arise and you are recognized as the professional that you are. And the most important thing is that if we speak Spanish, we can help Latino patients," she concludes. If you would like to know more about this program, you can call the Welcome Back Center of Suburban Maryland at (240) 777-4796.

### **And a hero, too!**

Wendy Mejía also became a hero last year. On October 8, after buying a few things to celebrate her husband's birthday, she saw there had been an accident on the corner of Georgia Avenue and Aspen Hill Road in Silver Spring, and that a baby had been injured. Mejía tells the story:

"I was headed home on Georgia Avenue. I got into the left lane to turn when I saw the accident. Like everyone else, I was trying to see what had happened and then I saw a baby on the ground not moving. I think it was between 12 and 14 months old. The mother was crying over her like crazy but later I found out it wasn't the mother. One car didn't stop at the intersection—I don't know why. It hit the other car, and the little girl went flying out because she wasn't buckled in, and she hit the ground with her forehead. She had a huge hematoma. When I got there, she wasn't moving and the police hadn't arrived yet. I told "the mother" I was a nurse, and I checked the baby to see if she was breathing. She wasn't breathing and she didn't have a pulse so I started to give her compressions on her chest. Then I heard some very heavy breathing, which is a sign that she was close to death, and she started to bleed through her nose and her mouth. I kept on doing the compressions with my two fingers, and a young Latino man got out of the car and called 911. I told him to hurry because the little girl wasn't reacting. I think that about three or four minutes passed, but to me it felt like a century. Then a police officer came, put on gloves and took over for me. Around the same time, the little girl reacted with some more belabored breathing. In another minute, the ambulance was there. They put her on the gurney and took her in."

Wendy Mejía's quick action helped to save the life of this little girl, and Wendy appeared on several TV channels telling the story. "What that experience left me with, more than anything, was how emotionally satisfied I felt to have been there at the right time. The baby had nearly taken her last breath, and keeping her heart beating helped to keep her alive."