

Highest Aspirations Podcast: S3/E02

From Cuba to Dartmouth (via Miami) with Take the Pledge Scholarship Winner Melany Quintero

Steve Sofronas:

Melanie Quintero, welcome to Highest Aspirations and congratulations on winning the Take the Pledge scholarship.

Melany Quintero:

Hi, thank you for having me.

Steve Sofronas:

It's a pleasure to have you on. We love chatting with students. We actually don't do it enough, so I'm really happy to talk to you about winning the scholarship, your future plans, and sort of your experience as a student, so let's start there. I'd love to hear about what brought you and your family to Pembroke Pines, Florida, which I believe is, it's in the Miami area. Am I right about that?

Melany Quintero:

Yes, it is.

Steve Sofronas:

Great. So where is your family originally from and why did you all sites come to the US?

Melany Quintero:

Yeah, so my family is originally from Cuba. I was born there and I lived there until I was nine years old. And the difficult situation that is, living in Cuba and just raising a child in Cuba was the main reason why my parents decided to just leave it all behind and come to a new country where they had to start basically from zero. Just the situations, a little bit about that is, the teachers would be just high school students. So I had a high school student teaching me during third and fourth grade, which she didn't really understand the content herself and she was trying to teach us. And there were also problems with like food availability and there was just scarcity with water and electricity. It was just terrible situation and my parents didn't see that fit to raise me and my little sister, and so we immigrated here and just moved in with our family that used to be here before us.

Steve Sofronas:

Sure. So similar to a lot of the stories we hear about people kind of just looking for a better life and coming to the US, and that's generally the story, like you said, of parents really wanting better for their children. And it sounds like they sacrificed a lot to get you here and obviously that is playing out in your future plans. And you came here when you were nine you said, right?

Melany Quintero:

Yes. When I was nine years old.

Steve Sofronas:

And obviously you're a native Spanish speaker, but already you can hear that your English is wonderful. And now you're a bilingual person who is getting ready to go to college. And we talked before, and one of the interesting things that you said to me, which I thought was great, is that you said that you learned a lot of your English through watching the Hannah Montana series on TV. So you have to tell us more about that because so many people, there's like this TV show that they watch that helps them learn English.

Melany Quintero:

Yeah. So when I came here, obviously we didn't have a lot of technology or resources, and we were gifted a DVD player and my cousin gave me the first season of Hannah Montana in CD. And so that was basically all I had available to myself and I would just watch it over and over again in Spanish actually, not in English. I was so reluctant to watch it in English and that was just sort of my only escape from everything. I was just like disconnect from all the problems and everything going on.

And so I got sort of bored of watching it in Spanish and I decided to just shake things up a bit by watching it in English. And what I didn't know then was that I had begun to have the language that they use I guess. Sort of the phrases they would use to say ... I don't know, like water or simple things like that. And I would just go on and repeat it myself once I had my own conversations in English. And so that was just basically the Rosetta Stone to my nine-year-old self.

Steve Sofronas:

That's great. So it sounds like you said you got bored with it, so it wasn't like an intentional thing. You weren't saying to yourself, "Ahora voy a mirar en inglés." It wasn't like that. It was just, "I'm going to shake things up because I'm a little bored." But then you realize that you had a little bit of a foundation, right? And you kind of built on that. That's great.

It's funny, so many people have a show that they watched. For some people, somebody I talked to recently was Friends that they learned English from, right, and that's such a powerful thing. And I remember when I was in Spain, I learned Spanish in Spain. And when I was there watching movies that I already knew in English, in Spanish helped me understand because I kind of knew what the dialogue was, and then I was able to put words together. So it's really powerful thing for sure.

Melany Quintero:

Exactly. Yeah, that's exactly what happened and I didn't even know it was happening, which is-

Steve Sofronas:

Which is even better, right? You don't even know you're learning and you are. But then you realize it at some point, that metacognition piece. That's awesome.

All right, so we also talked about something else last time we chatted, and it was a little bit more kind of a heavy theme that I want to get into, which is you brought up the stigma associated with immigrants and also EL students. Which is real, and something we talk about quite frequently in the podcast and here at Ellevation as well. Could you describe that stigma and how you experienced it as a student?

Melany Quintero:

Yeah. Since my very first day of school here in the United States, it was very difficult for me to understand my surroundings and any environment that I was in just because no student wanted to approach me or be my friend, not even the Spanish speakers who I knew spoke Spanish because I saw them talking Spanish to others, not because they necessarily spoke Spanish towards me. They would totally avoid me, and I didn't understand why at the moment, at that time. And my only friends would be other immigrants that immigrated around the same time as me and were going through the same situation, who to this day, are some of my closest friends.

And just as I moved on and I sort of began to better communicate others, I would approach them and asked them, "Hey, why didn't talk to me back then?" I was just trying to find the answer to, was it me? Was it something that I was doing? Just because I wanted to correct myself and try to make changes to be more appealing to others. And they were like, "No. It was just because you were an immigrant. We don't want to be around immigrants." And that to me was just very shocking for a child to say those things.

And just looking at it back, it is that stigma that society has given to immigrants because they talk about how immigrants are here to steal the jobs of others. So kids would be like, "Oh you're here to steal my parents' jobs or to do me harm," or something like that. And just because kids are just very aware of their surroundings that everything that's going on, even if we don't think that they understand, they truly do. I think they're very aware and they just carry on what they hear and see their parents do.

And so just talking about those ... I don't know, like trans-passing, giving students that information. They took it on as their own and they made their own assumptions based on just their surroundings. And sadly for me, that meant that they just didn't want to be my friends because, I guess, they were scared of what I could do to them. When in reality, I was like, I couldn't hurt a fly.

Steve Sofronas:

Yeah. Well, that's a really sad answer, but it's a really poignant one and one that I think is worth listening to and hearing. You mentioned a couple things that I think are key there that you said, "I think it will surprise a lot of people to hear that it wasn't a language thing." Because where you

are, there's a lot of Spanish speakers. It was somebody who is new and an immigrant thing. And I totally agree with you about, that children do sort of take in what they hear around them, both from their parents, from the media, if there's a television on, if they're on social media, if they're a little older, you can get in this echo chamber of sort of only looking at the world in one way.

I also wonder if, and this kind of goes to my next question, which is why do you think that exists? And I think you got into that a little bit, but I wonder if, do you think also there's sort of a fear that goes beyond just like immigrants are coming in and they're going to take my job, but just like a fear of somebody that's different? I also think, we were talking about this in Miami, and Miami is a very diverse area. This is a place where it's known that it's got a lot of different people. So I wonder if, do you think sort of why you think that stigma exists and I wonder if you also think, is it just that people don't know how to approach people that are different than them?

Melany Quintero:

They approached me at first because I was pale white with blonde hair, thinking that I was just like them, that was born here and whatnot. And the moment that they realized that I wasn't, that was it for them, and they didn't want to be near me. But if a new kid came and they spoke English and they lived here all their life, then they would be friends automatically. It wasn't something like a fear of somebody new, I guess, because they were very open to new kids and making new friends. It was just, I guess me and the other students like me that were immigrants that they didn't want to just be around. I guess they just didn't want to be responsible for teaching them the new ways of a new system or anything. I just think that. Again, it's just going back to that stigma, just reflecting, being a reflection of what your parents talk about, what they hear the news and everything that's going on.

Steve Sofronas:

Yeah. It's sad to hear this, but I think it's especially poignant coming from somebody like you who has obviously overcome a lot of obstacles. You're talking about one that you overcame socially and is off to do great things. I think we could be on this topic for hours and never necessarily come to a solution. But I think voicing it, and particularly when it comes from you, is really powerful, so I appreciate that.

In talking about those obstacles, I'm sure there were many, to get where you are now and I'm sure there's lots of people as well who are listening who would love to know more about your experience as an English learner. So could you talk to us a little bit about sort of your trajectory from where you started to where you are now? And I'll just remind folks that you came when you were nine from Cuba, at the beginning you mentioned that, and in the fall, you're off to Dartmouth College. So what's that journey been like?

Melany Quintero:

Yeah. So it took a lot of people just supporting me, especially teachers. When I started in fourth grade here, obviously, I didn't know anything, anything regarding English. But one thing that I did know was mathematics. And I believe three months after I started school, I had to take the

FCATs, which are the state final exams for you to advance to another grade, I guess. I didn't score very good at all on any but math, and I scored at four out of five points not knowing any English, and that was surprising to my teachers. And so-

Steve Sofronas:

That's amazing.

Melany Quintero:

Yeah. And then they put me in a little bit of a more advanced fifth grade class, and when I scored almost like perfect five, I think, I don't remember very well if it was in fifth or sixth grade. They realize that my mathematics level was way above average. And so they gave me the opportunity to start middle school in an advanced program. But the only setback was that I couldn't just take advanced mathematics, I had to take advance everything. Across the board, everything had to be just at a higher level.

Melany Quintero:

And when I started sixth grade, I was reading at around the third grade level and in my English class the students were reading it at ninth grade level. And so you can understand the discrepancies between me and all my peers.

Steve Sofronas:

Quite a gap.

Melany Quintero:

Yeah, a huge gap. I hate popcorn just because teachers would be like, "Oh let's do popcorn reading." And somehow it would always land on me. Yeah, and so I just began to push myself a lot, like a lot. Just constantly reading and just trying to be at the level that my teachers expected of me. Because they were aware of the fact that I just recently began to learn English, but that didn't stop them from grading me at the same level as everybody else.

And so I just couldn't let my parents down and not bring the grades home that I was supposed to bring, and so I just pushed myself harder and harder. And so in eighth grade, I finished taking 10th grade courses and did fantastically in them. And so when I started high school, given my track record in middle school of all the advanced classes that I took, I began taking college level classes.

And so that began opening some doors for me being that, it's just college counselor came next to me and started talking to me about colleges that were available. Because to me college wasn't something that was feasible when I came here, it was just a dream. And once I started high school and I saw that it was something that it was something that was obtainable, my whole perspective started changing.

I just, again, I stood my ground with mathematics and I just used it as my forced to keep me through high school years because it's my favorite subject and I was able to finish Calculus III on the fall semester of my senior year, which it's a very hard task to do. But I mean, I was done and it was great. And just having the opportunity of having just teachers guide me and tell me, "You should probably take this class over that class," just to fill my resume. Because my parents are not used to this system. They're not familiarized with everything that it takes to get into a college here. And so I was basically by myself and using the internet as my compass and just the teachers that would give me recommendations.

And so that was basically the academic side of getting to where I am right now. And just like the behind the scenes side was just all the community service that I did looking back because I wanted to help students like me. And all of my efforts for community service have been geared at helping students that just need that extra push, for minority students who are really not given the same resources as other students and just helping them like I was helped to just reach something that they just sort of dream of and something that they can aim just to help them attain that as well.

Steve Sofronas:

Yeah. Well, I have a couple of follow-up questions because you just mentioned a lot of things that come up a lot in the work that we do. I mean, the whole Ellevation Education mission is to help maximize impact on English learners, and we work with a lot of teachers who are trying to do that. So the first thing that I want to bring up is you talked first about the idea of sort of math, and I think you actually said at one point that math is like your ... I don't know if you use the word "power", but it sounded like math is like your force, right? The thing that you could do well.

Melany Quintero:

Yeah.

Steve Sofronas:

There's been a lot of research lately that actually talks about how STEM courses, how a lot of English learners and former English learners are gravitating towards STEM courses. Because language, it's not that it doesn't matter so much, but it's almost that it's its own language as it is. It's just another thing. And you already have the experience of sort of learning a language and so that's something that people are geared toward. I guess that's more of a statement than a follow-up question.

But my follow-up question is, you talked about how you sort of pushed yourself to take these courses that were rigorous, and then the teachers knew that you were not quite there with language and they gave you the support that you needed. And that's also a balance that we try to find as teachers, which is, where is the point where we push students, particularly English learners, give them the same opportunities that every other student has, but also provide them with the scaffolds and the resources that they need to do that?

So I guess my follow-up question is, is that something that you felt like you had to take on, on your own? Did you need to just do extra work and be a super motivated student to get to where you were or were there scaffolds and supports provided to you either formally or informally for you to achieve the way you did during those middle school years when you were in those advanced classes?

Melany Quintero:

Yeah. Definitely, it was a lot of my own doing more than anything. It had to be the student who is motivated to do something for themselves. I had to rely on Google Translate for a lot of my writing. I had to read just read all our books by myself because I didn't have necessarily my parents to go to. And the teachers that I did have, their help was limited. I mean, they have a couple of hundred students that they have to take care of and they're only available for me during a single class period. And so yes, their help was great, even their mentorship after school sometimes, but it takes a lot of self-motivation.

And if you find a student that is lacking in that area, I would just say to find the root of that problem because every student, I guess, has a dream that they want to achieve, especially younger kids. They're like, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" And they have an answer. That motivation sort of that is when, sort of becomes aware of the real world and what they can attain. And so I guess for teachers would be, find the root of the problem and just tell them that anything is attainable and just help them see, sort of build a roadmap for them to visualize that they can accomplish it, I guess.

Steve Sofronas:

Yeah. And that increases motivation. And again, there is a lot of research and information out there that shows, and it's obvious, I don't think we need researchers to tell us this, but there's stuff out there anyway that says, "Well, what do you know? You get to know who your students are and trust them with certain things." They trust you and then that leads to the motivation that's necessary to do the kinds of things that you did."

Because at the end of the day, I think you're right, it is on the student to sort of be motivated. But that motivation is tough to come by, particularly if, like you said, your parents weren't really familiar with the system and the school. There's a lot of students who aren't either and who don't really get to that place because they don't have the support.

So I'm really glad you mentioned that to have teachers kind of push students a little bit and really get to know them and understand what they want to do, and look at them, especially English learners, as assets to our system; going back to our old immigration conversation we were having earlier. These are people who are adding to the fabric of our communities, our schools, and in our country.

Melany Quintero:

Definitely. Yeah.

Steve Sofronas:

Yeah. That's really great. So I'm curious, given all that, could you point to one class or one teacher ... You don't have to name anybody about by names if you don't want them, but had a profound impact on your education up to this point? Was there a turning point or a specific class or teacher that you remember that really kind of made you succeed?

Melany Quintero:

Yeah. From my very, very first day of high school, Ms. Clark was my math teacher and I was, I believe, one or two of the freshmen in the entire class that was full of mostly juniors. And so she basically took me under her wings and just helped me get through all the hard times. And she, to this day, is my number one mentor. She was like my school mom, just number one cheerleader. Everything that crossed my mind, she was so for it. When I decided to run for school office, she was behind me giving me her all.

When I had the craziest idea to bring the Miami Heat cheerleaders to perform a fundraiser for cancer research, she was like, "Let's do it." She got on the phone with the managers and we were able to carry it out. It's just that she did more than just impart a lot of her knowledge of mathematics to me, she was just my mentor. She taught me and she just helped me in everything that I needed, and she never said no; and so, I owe a lot of my accomplishments to just her support and her mentorship.

Steve Sofronas:

That's wonderful. What a great tribute. And Ms. Clark, if you're listening, and I hope you are because Melanie should be sharing this with you, thank you for everything that you do. And obviously, I'm sure that you've inspired more students as well, so that's great. It's always nice to pay tribute to those teachers. As someone who is a teacher for a long time, and teachers tell you this all the time in high school, but it does mean a lot when you hear thank you, so that's great.

So let's talk about your future. You're off to Dartmouth College, which we mentioned in the fall. Which by the way, is in my home state of New Hampshire although it's further north than where I live. What are you most looking forward to about college and how are you going to deal with the New England cold? Are you ready for that?

Melany Quintero:

I am definitely not ready for the cold. I don't even know what to expect.

Steve Sofronas:

Well, I've lived here all my life, so any advice that you need, you can reach out to me anytime.

Melany Quintero:

Thank you so much. Yeah, I haven't really experienced anything under like 40 that we get here in South Florida sometimes. Yeah, it's going to be great. I get to freeze. So looking forward to it. Yeah, but I'm just looking forward to in my college years is just the research that I'm going to be able to do just at that college undergraduate level at Dartmouth because Dartmouth is so focused on undergraduate. And they're going to give me just all the resources I really need to explore, just my curiosity and just being able to find a problem, and decide to go research on it and explore it, and just maybe find something to help our community, you know? So that's really what I'm looking forward to, just that research portion of my undergraduate years.

Steve Sofronas:

I love it. I think so much of it is about satisfying your curiosity, and I love it that you said finding a problem to solve. Is there specifically something that you're going to study? Have you chosen a major or do you know the direction you're going to go yet? No pressure on that, by the way. I think you should take your time.

Melany Quintero:

Yeah, so I will be studying biomedical engineering and I want to focus on just the molecular level with gene therapy. Everything that's going on with genetics right now, as I look forward to just going into med school and just studying anesthesiology and just becoming an anesthesiologist.

Steve Sofronas:

Yeah, that's great. I would ask follow-up questions but they would probably sound pretty ridiculous because I don't have the knowledge necessary to ask those questions. But I'm sure that you will do great things and I know Dartmouth is a great place to do that many other things as well.

So my last question for you is probably the most important for any student who might be listening or parent of a student or a teacher who is trying to help students. What advice, and I think you've already given a lot of it, but if you could sum it up, what advice would you give to an English learner, a student who is just starting to learn English and maybe is facing some of the same challenges both with the language and maybe the social aspect that you did when you came here?

Melany Quintero:

Yeah. So to the students, I would just say, don't let anybody bring you down. Don't let any comments bring your self-esteem down because you're capable of doing anything and everything that you put your mind into doing. You're so capable, and only you define your limits. So you tell yourself what you want to accomplish, and it doesn't matter if society, if statistics even, say that you can't, you can. Because let me tell you something, I went on a website that would just tell me sort of the percent chance that I had in to getting in schools, and my percent chance of getting into Dartmouth was less than 5%. I'm not going to give you the numbers. I just

going to say less than 5%, and look at where I am. Not even statistics define you. So it's just go on and conquer the world and be who you truly want to be, not what anybody else tells you to be.

And to just teachers and parents, I would just tell you that, look after children and not put any limits on them either. If they want to go and just ... I don't know, like stay after school so to just do some researchers or just spend time with their friends, allow them. Don't place limits on them because you never truly know when their mind is going to click and when they're going to sort of make that life-changing decision. And just be supportive of everything that they do. And even if they don't bring home the grades that you want them to, just be supportive of them and let them know that you are happy with everything that they're doing because every little detail can affect a child in a way that you will never understand. And so just be supportive and be there for them even if you don't really understand what's going on.

Steve Sofronas:

That's great advice for students, teachers, and parents as well. And I am not going to try to summarize that in any way, but I would highly recommend going back one minute or so and listening to that again because those were really poignant words. And Melanie, it has been a pleasure speaking with you. Congratulations again on winning the scholarship. I think that everybody that has listened to this understands why you received the scholarship, and I think that you represent sort of the promise and the future and the hope that we have for students like you who are contributing amazing things to our communities. And just thank you so much for joining us and everything that you do.

Melany Quintero:

Thank you for having me.