



Marcella Bermudez

## Citizenship



# South Bay Adult School STORIES

At its meeting on April 29, The Redondo school board honored an outstanding employee who is also a new American citizen.

Marcela Bermudez, a secretary for the South Bay Adult School, immigrated to the United States from Columbia in 1997, six months pregnant and not speaking a word of English. Her husband had come a few months earlier on a visa to work as an architect in Marina Del Rey. Marcela decided that she, too, wanted to do well in her adopted country and set a good example for her children. Although they arrived on visas, Marcela and her husband decided to make a life here, and they started down the path of citizenship.

She didn't have a driver's license, and she took care of her children during the day, but every Saturday morning her husband drove her to her neighborhood adult school where she took English classes. Other women she knew told her not to bother. "You can get along fine speaking Spanish in LA," they had said. But Marcela was determined. She began taking Distance Learning classes so that she could study at home, "while the kids were taking a nap." Gradually, her English improved enough so that she was no longer afraid to answer the phone or talk to her neighbors. "I was so grateful that the classes were free, and I worked all the time to improve my English and learn about America," she said.

Adult education in the United States dates back to 1857 when the first school was opened in San Francisco. Its fundamental purpose was to educate immigrants seeking American citizenship. The country relied on immigrant labor, so government leaders reasoned that America had an important stake in maintaining an educated, English-speaking, loyal and skilled workforce. Today, there are more than 300 adult schools in California, and all of them still teach Citizenship and English as a Second Language.

Having learned English, Marcela applied for and received a Green Card. She was now able to get her first job. After receiving a Green Card, immigrants must wait five years to apply for citizenship. Marcela took Citizenship classes at the South Bay Adult School studying sample questions on flash cards at home. Finally, on February 1, 2008, eleven years after she first arrived, she and her husband were sworn in as American citizens.

Marcela now works for the adult school's Distance Learning program. She helps other immigrants who are learning English and aspire to citizenship. "I've been on the other side," she said. "I know what they are going through, and I'm so glad that I'm able to help them." Jerry Striff, the Executive Director of SBAS, calls her "an ideal employee."

On April 29, 2008 the Redondo Beach Unified School District will recognize Marcela as both a valuable employee and a proud new citizen.

*The South Bay Adult School offers all levels of ESL, as well as Citizenship classes. For students who can't make it to a class, Distance Learning packets can be completed at home. More than 1000 students currently attend one or more of these programs.*