

STUDENT LEADER

A BRIDGE ACROSS CULTURES

Citlali Ochoa uses language
to make sense of the world



Ochoa kneels in front of a painting by an apprentice teen artist at After School Matters, a nonprofit where she has worked and volunteered.

When her classmates and teachers call her a student leader, Citlali Ochoa tends to shake her head in doubt.

“To a point, I believe it,” she says, “but to a certain point, I don’t see it. I guess I’m still trying to understand.”

This thoughtful approach to finding herself and her place in the world has long been a part of Ochoa’s journey. Born in Jalisco, Mexico, Ochoa moved with her family to Chicago’s Pilsen neighborhood when she was six.

“I have a huge family in Mexico that I see every four or five years,” Ochoa says. “When I was a teenager, there were a lot of things I didn’t understand. I was stuck between two languages, two countries, two worlds. My cousins over there were making fun of my Spanish, and over here, English speakers can apparently hear some kind of accent, which made me feel self-conscious. You do end up in a situation where you start questioning your skills and who you are.”

Ochoa discovered her life’s work and leadership potential in language. As an undergraduate student in interdisciplinary studies in American sign language (ASL) and humanities at Chicago’s Columbia College, Ochoa got to see how closely related culture is with language and how difficult it is to learn new languages.

“I really fell in love with the process of interpreting and translation, and how you

become a language service provider,” she asserts.

Ochoa didn’t feel proficient enough in ASL to continue as an ASL-English translator and interpreter. She decided to get a master’s degree in Spanish to improve her command of the language “to a point where I could bring the most help to the community I serve, and that includes immigrants and L2 learners of English,” she says.

Ochoa’s husband, **Victor M. Salazar (History ’08)**, suggested she consider enrolling at DePaul. “Sure enough, after I did research, DePaul was my number one choice.”

She liked the flexibility of the program, particularly with regard to the electives. “I wanted a program that would start me somewhere, but let me go wherever I want.” So far, in addition to taking graduate classes in the modern languages program, Ochoa has sampled classes in the sustainable urban development and refugee and forced migration programs.

“Everything connects,” Ochoa says enthusiastically. “I was so surprised.”

When asked what she likes about what she’s doing, Ochoa says immediately, “Everything! I know that sounds cheesy and everyone says that, but I’m constantly learning things

that are pertinent not only to my field, but to myself as well—about my heritage, about who I am, who my people were. I started to see more of myself. I started to understand my past. You start answering questions, and it feels like a big load has been taken off of me. And I get to take this and share it with my family, so all around, it brings knowledge to a whole different level.”

Ochoa has volunteered for DePaul’s Translator and Interpreter Corps, the asylum and immigration law clinic and external nonprofits as a translator and interpreter. She sees a definite need for institutions to learn how to use social linguistic perspectives and processes to provide better services for their clients.

“It just seems like people are lost somewhere within the languages and culture,” she observes. She sees herself as an asset who can assess linguistic services at such institutions and bring them up a notch.

When asked what others see when they call her a leader, Ochoa says, “I think a hard worker, someone who knows how to sacrifice certain things to get other things done. My initial goal was just to perfect my Spanish. Now I’m finding out that besides translating and interpreting, I can write, I’m okay at doing research and I can teach. I was not thinking about a PhD before I started all of this, and now I’m ‘yes, yes, go for it!’”