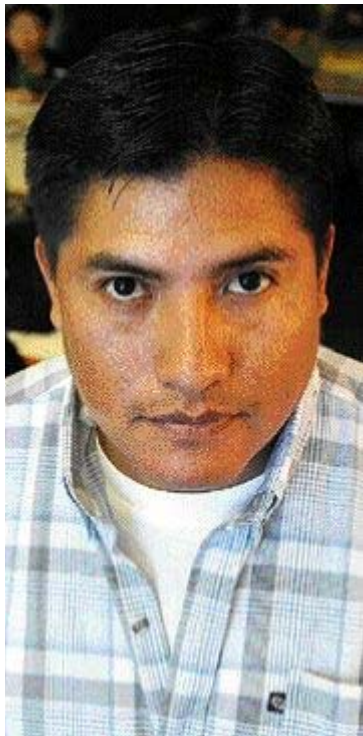


Soft-spoken student from Bolivia inspires children to become forces of change

BY TODD BABIAK, THE EDMONTON JOURNAL FEBRUARY 7, 2009



Victor Larico Ticona

Photograph by: Larry Wong, the Journal, The Edmonton Journal

When he was eight years old, Victor Larico Ticona's father left their little house in La Paz, Bolivia, to find work elsewhere in the country. Soon afterward, Larico Ticona's mother abandoned him. He was left to care for his three younger sisters, the sole income earner in an unlikely family of four.

During the day, while his sisters were in school, Larico Ticona worked in a football stadium, selling soda and coffee. He cleaned bathrooms, shined shoes. Then, in the evenings, he went to elementary school. Aunts and uncles kept an eye on them in La Paz, and then in Santa Cruz, in the resource-rich eastern part of the country. Larico Ticona is now 32. For most of his life, he has worked 18-hour days. Today he drives a motorcycle taxi in the mornings and works on his studies in the afternoons and evenings. All he has left to do is write his thesis, and he will graduate with a master's degree in law. He intends to practise law for a while, and to help reform the penal code in Bolivia. When it seems right, he will run for politics. First in the city of Santa Cruz, and then nationally. When you suggest he will run for president one day, he does not shrug it off or make an ironic comment, like a Canadian might.

"Ojalá," he says. I hope so.

Larico Ticona spoke to an unusually quiet Grade 6 class at Earl Buxton School in Riverbend on Friday. He has been in the city to commemorate International Development Week, to talk about his country and his life -- and what he sees as its lessons. He began his presentation by asking, through a translator,

Diana Coumantarakis of the Alberta Council for Global Co-operation, if anyone in the class had ever felt like they could not do something. Had they ever felt too timid to try? A few students raised their hands, timidly.

He told his story, punctuated with both enthusiasm for his country and a note about the extraordinary lives of Canadians. "There are no public schools in Bolivia this beautiful," he said, gesturing about him.

There were large Obama inauguration photos and newspaper articles on the blackboard, where the teacher, Andrea Berg, had also written, "Happy Birthday Andrew!" Larico Ticona repeated, several times, that with education, the students could accomplish great things. His unlikely progression from extreme poverty to the professional class, in a country where upward mobility is very, very difficult, was proof that they should not drop out of school. The children smiled throughout, drawn to Larico Ticona's quietude, his polite charisma. Coumantarakis asked the class how many of them spoke a second language. More than one-third raised their hands. They spoke Cantonese, French, Serbian, Mandarin, Vietnamese and Korean. One girl spoke six languages -- English, French, Punjabi, Hindi, Tamil and Portuguese.

The Alberta Council for Global Co-operation represents more than 60 international development organizations based in the province to harmonize their efforts. Coumantarakis will take Larico Ticona to Rimbey, Lacombe and Calgary before he returns to Santa Cruz. With an Afghan immigrant to Canada, they will visit Gunn, Leduc, Edson and Edmonton. The organization's educational mandate is clear, supported by the Canadian International Development Agency: to create an infrastructure, in Canada, to support sustainable human development and justice abroad.

Coumantarakis's own career trajectory began when she was 16. She took a school trip to South Africa. "It totally shifted my view of the world," she says, "of everything." In university, she completed a degree in rural development that took her to remote areas in Mexico. Then she was off to Guatemala to work for a refugee-support society.

Her experience, and the cultural diversity in Ms. Berg's Grade 6 class, is part of what Larico Ticona sees as Canada's identity. Since 2006, our diplomatic corps has shrunk considerably; we now have the lowest proportion of diplomats stationed abroad in the G8, and our public diplomacy program is non-existent. Canada's reputation abroad, second only to Germany in a BBC poll released Friday, now relies on a non-sanctioned army of people like Coumantarakis -- who was born with no Latin American roots but has invested her career in making links between individuals and organizations in Edmonton, and individuals and organizations in cities such as Santa Cruz, Bolivia. Our lead diplomatic corps, it seems, has become CIDA.

If we're unwisely getting out of the business of diplomacy, this is a smart compromise for the federal government; to support an international development year abroad for young Canadians, at the end of high school or university, and to introduce people such as Larico Ticona to Grade 6 students.

Larico Ticona finished with a piece of motivational wisdom that, again, did not seem cloying or forced. "There are many things in the world that can be changed," he said, "and you young Canadians can be the people who change them." Ms. Berg's class applauded for an eerily long time, as though a

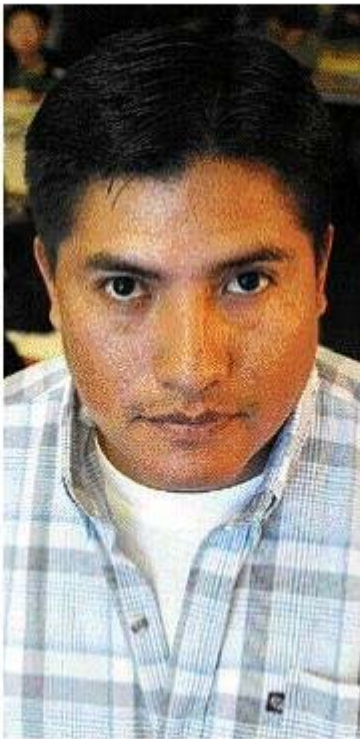
symphony had ended. Just when you thought it was time to stop clapping, they started anew.

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