Professor overcomes loss to craft COVID-19 student brochures

May 5 2021, by Luis Andres Henao

LaGuardia Community College professor Lucia Fuentes teaches her honors biology class via videoconference from Ontario, Canada, on Tuesday, May 4, 2021. Fuentes assigned her students to create multilingual online brochures on the science of the coronavirus and vaccinations to help make the information more accessible. (Lorena Fuentes via AP)

When the coronavirus pandemic struck New York City, LaGuardia Community College professor Lucia Fuentes assigned students in her

honors biology class to compile all the information they could find about COVID-19.

The result? An online multilingual brochure based on research from peer-reviewed journals, the World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that has become a valuable resource for immigrants in the United States and their families abroad.

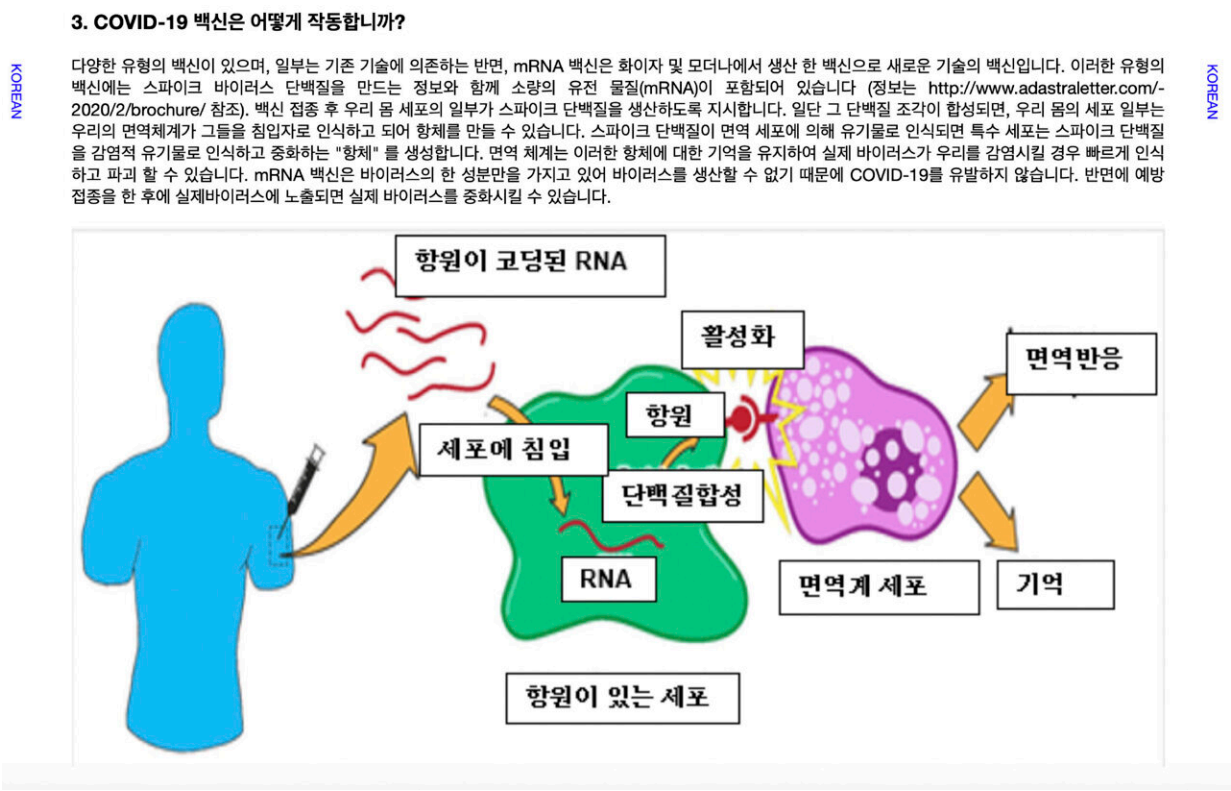
"Science is complicated and we have to make it more accessible," Fuentes said. "This is why ... I thought it would be a good thing for the students, and that it would be a contribution."

Nothing stopped the project—not even the death of Fuentes' husband on March 25, 2020 due to complications from COVID-19, or her own bout with the disease. In her grief, she remains committed to her students and determined to prevent others from getting sick.

"I wasn't going to drop my students, and I knew they were going through tons of really horrible stuff," she said. "I talked to some of them afterwards ... and they really appreciated that."

She also valued their support.

"Students gave me strength," she said. "Knowing that they expected me to be there, that's what propels me. It always has. I love my students."



This illustration provided by LaGuardia Community College, shows a diagram in Korean explaining RNA vaccine technology used in the COVID-19 vaccines as a part of the LaGuardia Community College's second online Undergraduate Research Newsletter, which breaks down the science behind the coronavirus vaccinations. The multilingual project was spearheaded by professor Lucia Fuentes, who guided her honors biology students in researching, preparing and publishing information on the coronavirus and the vaccines developed to counter it. (LaGuardia Community College via AP)

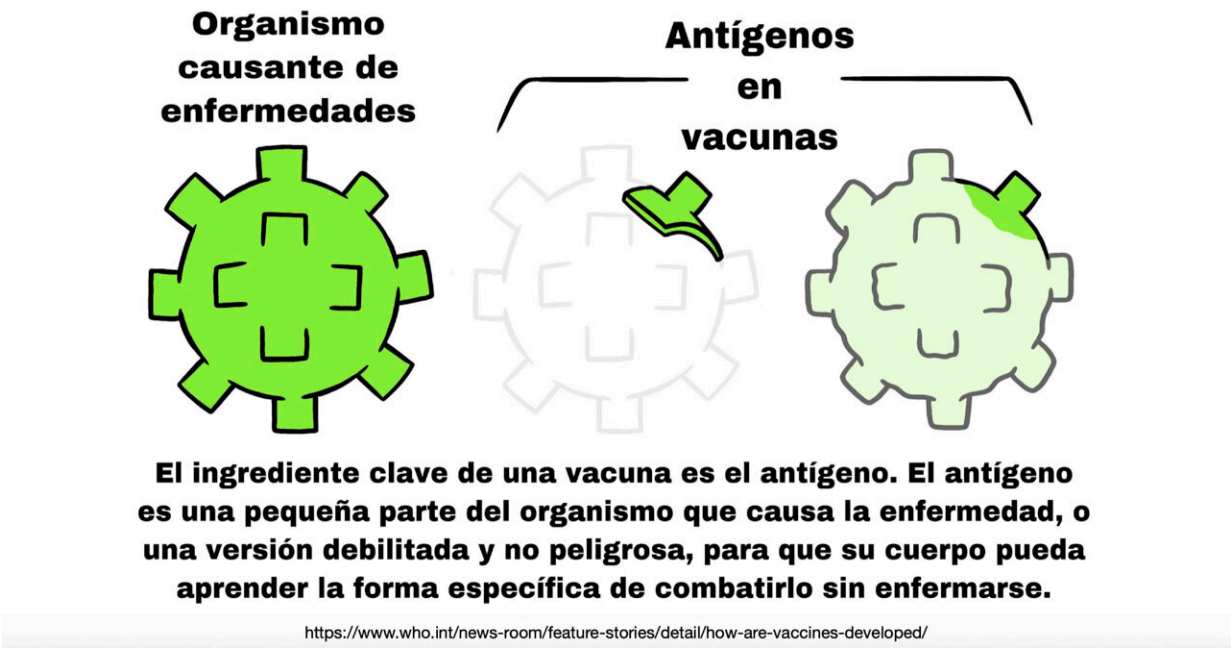
The class brochures were also printed and distributed in her native Guatemala as well as in Colombia. Her most recent work involves information about COVID vaccines.

Students have already helped translate the latest brochures into their

native languages, including Albanian, Korean and Portuguese.

Fuentes' project is rooted in her own life experiences. She fled Guatemala after her father—Alberto Fuentes Mohr, a respected political leader, economist and diplomat—was kidnapped in 1970 and killed in 1979. When she went into exile to Switzerland, she didn't know French, and she felt like she fell behind in class because of the language barrier.

"It was an eye-opener in every way in terms of how I realize the struggle and the questioning of the `fairness' of those of us who get the possibility of having an education," she said.



This illustration provided by LaGuardia Community College, shows a Spanish-language diagram explaining the function of antigens in vaccines, which is part of a brochure on COVID-19 produced by students at the college. The multilingual project was spearheaded by professor Lucia Fuentes, who guided her honors biology students in researching, preparing and publishing information on the coronavirus and the vaccines developed to counter it. (LaGuardia

Community College via AP)

CHINESE

https://covid-19.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202003/29/WS5e7ff7c0a310128217282c16.html

CHINESE

5. 我们什么时候才可以重回正常社交模式?

尽管科学家们已经在争分夺秒地努力寻找消灭病毒的方法，到目前为止还没有生产出疫苗或者有效的药物。我们对于此病毒的部分分子成分仍不够了解。从各种报告的说明中，科学家们正在扼制病毒的新突变，以防止他们扩大蔓延，突变是一个不好的兆头，因此我们更是需要相信科学，运用科学技术，得到对病毒的一个大体的把握。人们有必要了解病毒的基本信息，认识到它的传播方式，保护好每一个社区，还有配合政府制定的新的应对策略，才能够起到对正在隔离期的每个人的帮助。现在我们也得知了病毒极强的传染力，所以大家更应该要采取一切防御措施，以免我们当中最脆弱的群体受到感染。

Image credit: https://www.who.int

This illustration provided by LaGuardia Community College shows an online brochure on COVID-19 produced by students at the college, which has been translated into Chinese and several other languages. The multilingual project was spearheaded by professor Lucia Fuentes, who guided her honors biology students

in researching, preparing and publishing information on the coronavirus and the vaccines developed to counter it. (LaGuardia Community College via AP)

When she became a college professor, she saw how her students faced a similar struggle.

"I realized that it was the language. They were smart, they knew the stuff, it was just the language."

Ruben Felipe Perez, a LaGuardia student from Colombia who hopes to attend medical school, called Fuentes an "amazing human being" who inspires many by overcoming great challenges in her quest to keep others safe.

"She just turned all that grief into giving to the rest of the community," he said.