Professor overcomes loss to craft COVID-19 student brochures

5 May 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.