



THE CENTER FOR ARTS EDUCATION

AN IMMIGRANT PUBLIC SCHOOL PARENT SPEAKS

CAE's Office Manager, **Rey Millares**, came to New York City from the Philippines in August 2003. Just last year, his wife and four children – who now attend public elementary, middle and high schools in Brooklyn – came to join him. Below are excerpts from his recent conversation with CAE's **Alex Santiago-Jirau**, Program Associate for the Career Development Program, about his new awareness of arts education in the United States and being a parent in the New York City school system.



AS-J: Coming to the United States from the Philippines just three years ago must have been quite a transition. Tell me about your recent experiences in the U.S. and your work here at The Center for Arts Education.

RM: At first, being in the U.S. was difficult because it wasn't easy to translate my previous experience and qualifications in a new country. My job as office manager at CAE is one of the first professional roles I've had in the U.S. which directly relates to my career in the Philippines, where I was an accountant.

When I started in this position, I assumed that I wouldn't really be part of our organization's mission to restore the arts to New York City's public schools, because my role is strictly administrative. But in just a few weeks, through being part of important staff conversations here at CAE and thinking about my work in relation to my experience as a parent, I realized that I really *am* a part of this mission. I now approach all of my duties here in the office with our shared goals in mind, and I know that our work together is extremely important for this City.

AS-J: I know you don't come from a background in the arts, but I'm curious – what are your thoughts about arts education?

RM: Well, apart from some acting experiences in college, I did not have much arts education myself. But actually, I believe arts education is important in every child's life. I once worked with kids in a day care center and I noticed something. Even at a young age, the kids were so alert and so interested when they were experiencing arts learning – much more so than when they were doing their other lessons. But the art classes at the day care center got cut off because of budget constraints, which I understand is often the case. What I saw there is that

there is an eagerness about children when they are experiencing art that is very important in development and in their entire life.

AS-J: You mentioned your role as a parent. What has the transition to a new country – and a new education system - been like for your children?

RM: Yes, I have four children. My eldest, a daughter, is in high school, and my three sons are in elementary, middle, and high schools – all in the Dyker Heights area of Brooklyn. The language adjustment was fairly easy for them because they spoke English in school in the Philippines. Academically, though, the transition was difficult because they each had to skip a grade due to their age. But with a lot of family support at home, they have been able to overcome this difficulty. My wife, who was a teacher in the Philippines, gives them a lot of help with homework, and I make sure to go to every parent-teacher conference so that I can stay informed. We also live in a great neighborhood, so it has been easy for my kids to make new friends and get involved in activities.

AS-J: Are they involved in any arts activities?

RM: Well, my daughter was very into piano back in the Philippines, but piano lessons here are too expensive, so she has just been practicing on her own at home with a keyboard. She and my sons have become more interested in sports, but my third child does play in the band at school and my second child takes a course in jewelry design.

AS-J: Do you think they have adequate arts education opportunities available to them in their schools?

RM: Yes, they do have a lot of arts education opportunities in their new schools – certainly more than in schools in the Philippines, where the emphasis is strictly academic. And I think my children have a lot of artistic talent, too, I just don't think they are very driven to pursue the arts professionally.

I would really like for my children to cross paths with other students who are active in the arts, so they can realize the value of the arts in their own life, even if they don't want to become artists. For example, I would love for my daughter to observe Boot Camp in CAE's Career Development Program, which I know you help coordinate. I think it would give her the opportunity to learn a lot about planning a career, but also to ask questions and meet other high school students who are doing exciting things in the arts. She has been working on her resume and she gets a lot of support from the school's guidance office, but an experience like Boot Camp would encourage her to really broaden her horizons and try new things.

[To learn more about Boot Camp and the Career Development Program, please visit <http://www.cae-nyc.org/programs/career.htm>]

AS-J: Of course, and there are lots of behind-the-scenes roles in the arts, and many people combine interests in several different disciplines as they build their career. You are actually a great example of that, since you are using your background in accounting and administration to contribute to an arts organization.

RM: Yes, and although I have not had a lot of arts training, I really do think that accounting is an art! In fact, I've learned that life is always an art. Although I listen to contemporary folk music and love to sing in karaoke, I wish I could do more artistic things, like play the guitar. But I do try to approach my daily life and work just as an artist approaches a piece of music, a stage

or a blank canvas. My role at The Center for Arts Education has helped me to remember this, and I love being a part of our mission. My dream is to watch my kids work hard and succeed in school here, and I'm proud to work for an organization that is contributing to the quality of the public education that is available to them.

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