

# 2024 Ruby Award

## Maria G. Fabregas Janeiro

### Dream Big, Live Bolder



I would like to start my presentation by thank you ESP for this incredible honor. I joined ESP in 2015 and got closer to the organization when they decided to host the ESP Latino affinity group. I will be forever grateful with ESP for giving us the opportunity to be here. I also would like to thank Dr. Atilas who game me my first job in Extension in 2013. In 2015, I moved to California as the Assistant Director for 4-H Diversity and Expansion. In 2018, I decided to apply for a job in the State of Missouri, mainly because the reputation of the Extension Director at that time who was a very special leader, you probably know him, Dr. Marshall Steward. Dr. Steward was brave enough to hire a person like me to be the Missouri 4-H Leader and I will be forever grateful with him. I also would like to say thank you to my friends from Missouri. They are here with me today. Thank you to my daughter Maria who made the trip here and left her little two boys to be with me here today.

I would like to start with a disclaimer, because I need you to pay attention because my accent is very strong. I have tried to improve but I don't think I will be able to talk like you in my whole life. It's just hard. Since I learned how to speak English very old.

I am going to start by sharing my life with all of you. My name is not Lupita Fabregas, my real name is Maria Guadalupe Fabregas Janeiro. I am Maria like many for women from Mexico, because we need a Catholic name to get baptized. Then Guadalupe who is the patron Virgin in Mexico and my father want to have the first Guadalupe in our family. Then Fabregas is my father's name and Janeiro my mothers' name. When I became American citizen, they asked me if I want to change my name, that was my opportunity, but I did not do it because all my papers were and are with my full name. So I takes a lot of skills to write all my names in the American forms.

I was born and raised in Mexico, I came to the United States in 2002 when I was 44 years old. My parents' parents immigrated to Mexico at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. They were hard workers. My father finished 5<sup>th</sup> grade and my mother attended technical school to become an Administrative Assistant. I did not grow up with much, but education was always a priority. My parents never asked me if I want to go to high school or college, it was an understanding that we all will be attending college. We were the first generation to go to college. Talking about lifelong learners. I went to three higher education institutions, the first one was Monterrey Tech

and I was there in the 70s. I don't know how much you know about the Seventies but Monterrey Tech was very far from my house. The culture was that the girls leave in their home until they get married. The girls do not go to college and live in dorms. But my mother was different, she allowed me to attend college and to face all the challenges and criticism that came with allowing me to do it. When I finished my undergraduate, I wanted to continue my education, but we do not have the money to do it. So I wait 20 years to finish my Master, and 10 more years to finish my PhD. I feel I have been in college all my life.

When I lived in Mexico, I worked for a private catholic university. When my daughter finished elementary school, I asked the president of my university if he could send me abroad so my kids for a year so they can learn English, because I did not have the resources to send them to a boarding school, like some of the Mexican families do. I did not have the resources, but I was full of ideas, so I sold my ideas to the president of the university who agreed to send me for one year to Oklahoma, due the signing of a new MoU between both universities, and I say yes. When I get back home, I look for a map to find where Oklahoma was. I was ready to move to another country, and my life changed forever.

I have worked for four institutions in my life, I worked at UPAEP in Mexico for 29 years, at Oklahoma State for 2, University of California for 4 and I have 5 years working with the University of Missouri. Changing jobs and looking for opportunities was new for me. In Mexico, you do have these opportunities, when you find a job you hold to it, you normally live in the same town and probably the same house all your life.

Moving to the United States was an adventure, my English was not good but anyhow I grabbed three pieces of luggage and my two kids and moved to Oklahoma. When I arrived to Oklahoma, I was making \$1,200 a month, I got an apartment for \$800 and every week I remember taking my \$100 dollar bill and asking myself how we will spend our money. Or biggest thing at that time was eating at Cici's pizza for \$4.99 per person. But after living here for more than 22 years, it is not about the money. My kids starting to speak English, and it was easy to be happy. We did not have to be worry about our safety. Sometimes I think all the American teenagers should have the opportunity to travel abroad for six months so they can appreciate all we have here.

The biggest challenge I faced was to learn English, but we never complained because we were blessed to come to the USA with a visa. Having a visa gave us all the opportunities. After having a J, H-1 visa, a permanent resident status we were able to apply to become American citizens. Now my kids and I are all Americans by choice.

Learning English was a journey for me, from investing in a class at Oklahoma State to taking English as a Second Language Classes at the high school. But I needed to learn enough English to be accepted in the PhD program. I studied hard until I make the 550 points in the TOEFL test I

needed to be accepted. I hope more people volunteer to teach English to people like me, that really change our lives.

Everything was a challenge, from passing the driving test to memorizing the maps to drive to the soccer games. It was hard to become a person who do not know anything after being “so smart” in Mexico. It is hard to realize that people do not understand you, that you can not express what you want or what you need. So the next time you see a person that would like to be invisible, think about me and make every effort to connect with them.

The time run fast and when my kids finished high school they want to go to college but again, we did not have the money to make it happen. However, they worked hard, my daughter won a scholarship to play soccer at Oral Roberts, she was the first girl from Stillwater High school to play division I soccer. She is very good. My son, won academic scholarships and was able to attend Oklahoma State University. We are a family of Oklahoma State Cowboys, I finished my PhD at Oklahoma State, my daughter finished her master and my son his undergraduate. Go Cowboys! When people tell you it is impossible, think about my family.

In 2015, my daughter decided to get married and with my kids out of the house, I thought What is next for me? I applied for a job in California, and I moved there. One of my students motivated me to apply and I will be forever grateful with her. My life changed again because I made the decision to work for 4-H, and I found my passion. My job in California was reach the Latino youth and invited them to join 4-H. I was able to end a lot of the myths related to extension and 4-H. For example, the Latinos don't care about 4-H, they don't care because we haven't done a good job telling them what 4-H can do for them. We haven't given them the opportunity to join 4-H. But they sure care. I worked with an amazing team in California, we documented every experience we had. We started the program in seven counties, and for those counties we revolution 4-H. All the youth we invited wanted to join 4-H, we offered them different experiences and we found that there were not significant difference between the experiences in 4-H Community Clubs and the experiences in the new clubs. That is another myth. All the experiences in 4-H are meaningful and important, and all they youth deserve to have the opportunity to join 4-H. During my tenure in California the 4-H program in the Latino communities grow 200%. We had Clubs at the churches and at the farms, we create a sense of belonging.

The challenge for the new generation of 4-H Professionals is to be able to serve all the communities in the same way. The first step is to invite them and make them feel they belong. There are a lot of resources to engage new audiences. Try something new, something different, something that will change one kids life. Learn about the culture of the new youth you must reach, make them feel proud of who they are. We are not the same and we shouldn't try to deliver 4-H the same way without considering the culture.

In 2018, the budget for the Latino Initiative was ended in California, and I really wanted to get close to my kids who were living in Oklahoma and Missouri. I saw an opening in Missouri 4-H and decided to apply for the 4-H State Leader position. I left California in 2019 and became the first Latina to serve as the 4-H State Leader in the United States. Since I arrived to the state of Missouri, I saw a lot of opportunities to work together, but it was not easy. Some people did not accept my leadership and that reflected in their willingness to try new things. However, I am not a quitter and I built systems, policies, procedures and set statewide goals to grow our program. I need to be honest and share with you that being the outsider is hard but we can not allow that to stop us from doing what we believe is right. The leadership in Missouri Extension supported me and I am still here. The 4-H program in Missouri is now nationally recognized, we have long term goals, and we are growing our program. I have built a team that I call “my dream team” in the state office and I am sure they will be making a difference. We are working to connect the University of Missouri to 4-H since some of the people in 4-H did not know that we were a university program. Our mascot “Truman” now wears a 4-H t-shirt.

Now our efforts to diversify our delivery modes and to reach new audiences are an important part of what we do. We also are adopting the 4-H Thriving Model and joined the Beyond Ready campaign. We will have to work harder to retain the youth that are leaving 4-H, build internal and external partnerships and offer different online 4-H Experiences, if we want to continue being relevant.

To end my talk, I want you to take my story and transform it into some action plans. How can we grow our 4-H programs and diversify our audiences/

Number one, we need to be honest. Not all the people are equipped or willing to work with people like me. Don't force the situation, just keep sending the message about the importance of growing our program and reaching all our youth. We need to be sure that all the people who work in Extension believe that our action plan is the right thing to do.

Number two, set your goals. In Missouri we are very clear in what we want and how we can get there. Diversifying the way we reach our audiences and offer our programming is the key of our success. For example, we are making a huge effort to be in the schools, in community centers, at the libraries, etc. Foster an environment where youth lead, we need to prepare the next generation of leaders.

Number three, lead by example. The Extension professionals need to set the tone, lead by example. Review your budget, be fair and assign resources to the new audiences and the innovative programming. In the state of Missouri, we have 1 million kids that could join 4-H but I only have 50,000 in 4-H. I want to serve all the kids, everybody should be a 4-Her.

Number four, take your time. Get to know the community, be part of the community. Attend the church, buy your groceries in the supermarket where you are serving as Extension professional. Let the people in the community approach you and share their needs. It is hard to understand the community if you are not part of it.

Number five, find safe places to meet and to engage the community. Places where the families feel safe and comfortable attending. Churches or the schools are good places to meet.

Number six, follow the 4-H Thriving Model developmental context, by building trust in your communities, letting the youth find their spark, build relationships and get engaged. The power of 4-H is not the curriculums we use, is the relationship youth build with trustworthy adults. Be sure you have a program for all your youth. Our responsibility is to prepare youth for life, prepare them for work and prepare them for life.

Diversity is not only race or ethnicity, but diversity also includes income level, gender, age, school year, so don't let people believe that there is not diversity in your county. Remember that the culture of your organization is a combination of what you create and what you allow, what kind of culture would you like to have in your organization? You are responsible for creating that culture in your organization, nobody can do that for you. I know this job is hard, and sometimes 24/7.

We need to be very proud because we are making a difference on the lives of a lot of the kids and adults in our communities. A lot of the people living in small counties have only the opportunity that you can provide them. You have the power to make the difference on the lives of the people you serve.

And always remember it is always possible to dream big, to live bolder and if you don't believe it just think about me and my journey.

Thank you