

## No Limits to His World

*M.Ed. student and Spanish instructor Wilson Garcia believes in teaching as a way to bridge cultures*  
by Marcia Santore

Wilson Garcia had never heard of New Hampshire before taking a job at Loon Mountain, but the state has become his home.

Garcia was born and raised in Medellín, Colombia. “My father can hardly read,” he says, “But he always encouraged me to learn all I can.” That value, and his own interest in other cultures, led Garcia to complete a bachelor’s degree in foreign languages at Universidad de Antioquia in Colombia. In 1998, at age 23, Garcia left his home to come to the U.S. “I came to the United States because I could no longer stand the social chaos in which Colombia (and particularly my hometown, Medellín) sank because of the urban war between the cocaine cartels and the Colombian government.” He was part of an exodus of around four million Colombians, now scattered around the globe.



With the help of family and friends, he obtained the necessary documents to come to the U.S. Once here, he found himself obliged to take a series of low-paying jobs—cleaning boats in a marina, housekeeping in a hotel, working in restaurant kitchens—to survive and to send money back home to his parents.

“The first year here was very hard,” Garcia recalls. “Many times I felt like ‘just give up and go back.’ But I knew I could not let my family and myself down, not after all their effort and time. I convinced myself that things would get better and stayed focused on getting back to school. And then, finally, slowly but steadily, with the help of new friends and a new family in the United States, all that time and effort began to show results. I guess teaching is my way to say to those who have helped me to find a new life, ‘thanks.’”

When the New York hotel where he was working closed for the winter, Garcia was out of a job. A friend told him there was work at a ski area in New Hampshire. Garcia asked, “What’s New Hampshire?” In many ways, he’s still trying to answer that question.

“It took a while for people here to get used to me—not be afraid of me—and for me to get used to them,” he says. One of his constant surprises since coming to the U.S. is finding himself on the receiving end of ethnic prejudice and bigotry. “I try to give people the benefit of the doubt and not assume they mean anything negative,” he says, but “I never expect things like that to happen, so they always catch me off guard.” Garcia has been mistaken for a chauffeur, a gangster, even an African American. He’s

been called names he didn't know. And he's been given "the look"—the one that means "You don't belong here." He can't help but notice the negative portrayals of Latinos in the U.S. media.

"Racism and bigotry are just ignorance and fear," Garcia states. "We have our own prejudices in Latin America—tensions between culture and culture, nation and nation." Coming from a place where he was in the majority to a place where he is in the minority has given him perspective on how blacks and Indians are treated in his own country.

Garcia is frustrated by how often these incidents happen with otherwise educated people. His grandmother described such people as "Letrados pero no educados" (literally "literate but not educated" but connoting "educated but still ignorant").

He points out that everyone would benefit by learning more about communities different from their own, particularly those who interact with people at a professional level, such as social and health care workers, federal and state employees, teachers, etc. "It will make their jobs easier [and] the people they're trying to help wouldn't be so anxious or have so much resistance." This belief is part of what motivated him to become a Spanish teacher, he says, quoting the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, who said, "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world."

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"If you're here, you must learn some basic English. Otherwise you risk being marginalized from mainstream society," Garcia asserts. "On the other hand, there's this unrealistic expectation among some people that a non-English speaker can learn the language in a year or less." He also wants to encourage English-speaking Americans to learn at least a small amount of a foreign language as well. "You don't have to be fluent in somebody else's language. If you just learn a few words, it shows that you're open, willing to build a bridge. You're saying, 'I value your language and respect your culture.'"

Explains Garcia, "The United States, for any immigrant, is like a big school. I have a strong belief that for most of us, who are not wealthy people, education is the door to a better life. Even if it doesn't make you a millionaire, it will improve you as a human being."

Garcia and his wife live in Lincoln, N.H. He would often drive past Plymouth State on the highway and was curious about it. He'd heard good things about the University from friends, and when he felt he was finally in a position to go back to school, he decided to check it out.

At first, Garcia planned to pursue alternative teacher certification in Spanish—a critical need area in New Hampshire. Barbara Lopez-Mayhew, associate professor of Spanish and chair of the foreign language department, suggested that he might be better off going straight for an M.Ed. degree with teacher certification in Spanish.

In his first class as a graduate student, Garcia was one of only two men and the only Latino. “I felt like I stuck out like a sore thumb,” he recalls, but he soon settled in and began to feel at home. “All the classes have been great. The professors are outstanding, from all points of view—their knowledge, they treat you fairly and value that you’re different. The classmates I’ve had in the graduate program have all been very supportive.” He enjoyed taking classes with visiting teachers from Pakistan last summer, and learning more about their culture and customs, as well as a few words of Urdu.

In fall 2004, Lopez-Mayhew asked him to teach two sections of Continuing Spanish for PSU. After three semesters, he modestly reports, “It’s getting better. It’s getting much better.”

His students are more complimentary. Heidi Ohlson reports, “He has really sparked my interest in Spanish. As a childhood studies major, I hope to be a teacher like him. ... It is obvious that he really cares about what he is doing.”

As a teacher, Garcia encourages his students to widen their horizons and learn about the world. He tries to create a friendly atmosphere, where everyone feels comfortable to talk and participate. “I’m a student myself,” he tells them, letting them know he faces the same problems they do. “We have to learn by our own mistakes. We have to try it out. Don’t be afraid to take risks.”

Also in fall 2004, he taught a Spanish class in Gorham, N.H., offered through PSU. “When I heard about it, I was surprised since the Spanish speaking population in northern New Hampshire is near to zero,” Garcia says. “At the same time, I was delighted to have the opportunity to share my native language and culture with some people who probably had never interacted with a Latino in their lives.” More than twice the expected number of students enrolled, so the course was divided into two sections.

“We had some high school kids (some with their parents), an elementary school girl with her grandmother, an elderly couple, housewives, office workers, factory workers, a forest ranger, retirees, etc.,” he says. “I felt it was a great experience for all of us, since most of the time, during our formal education, we had been grouped by similar ages or our field of work.”

Many of these students already knew some other languages—mostly French, but also Mandarin, Tagalog, Swedish and Norwegian. “This multilingualism proved to be a

great asset, which helped students to accelerate their understanding and learning of Spanish, and sometimes it helped me to understand better and improve my English.” One adult student had been exposed to Spanish for a short time as a child. Through the class, she began to recall those early memories and rapidly relearned what she knew, while rediscovering her Hispanic heritage.

Garcia is thinking about more ways to bridge cultural gaps in New Hampshire. The state’s Latino population is increasing, especially in the southern region. In spring 2006, Garcia will offer an introductory Spanish class specifically for health care workers, through PSU’s Community Education office.

This year, Garcia received a fellowship from Graduate Studies, enabling him to give up his restaurant job and keep a more manageable schedule. “The fellowship is making a big difference,” he says. “PSU is really supporting my ‘quest.’ I would not have made it this far without the help and support of the faculty and staff in the department of foreign languages. They all are like my family.”