Ingrid Sub Cuc knows and understands that, though it is a hard job, she is the one who travels between two worlds.

She has to “put on the different hats” without betraying the community or herself, and what she stands for, as she stands on the bridge between cultures, in her dual identity as an indigenous Maya woman who lives in Spokane.

In doing so, she will be using the gift of her identity to help others to connect well and build community for a stronger, more just world. Ingrid knows she belongs in community. More specifically, she forges a way to create networks and belonging wherever she lives and works, not just for herself but for others also seeking connection.

The question of identity is central for most humans: “Who are we? From where do we come? What is important to us? How do we connect with those around us who are similar to us or different from us?”

For Ingrid, these questions came to the forefront when she moved to Spokane as a pre-teen with her family. She came to the United States from her village and region in central Guatemala, speaking both Spanish and Kaqchikel, but not English.

As an indigenous person from Guatemala, she discovered that she could identify as either Latina or Native American.

Ingrid had to learn how to fit in and who she was in this new place with a new language, customs, school system and clothing.

Because she had come “from a place where I was deeply rooted in my identity as an indigenous person through traditions and language,” she was prepared for the challenge. In that region, at least 90 percent of the population is indigenous.

Teachers, other students and her family helped her and her sister to learn English, and navigate other cultural and geographic situations.

For example, in her Guatemalan village, she never needed winter clothing for the cold and snow. Plus, she and her sister visited the Spokane Public Library to learn and to read so often, it was like they lived there. Through this major transition in her teen years, Ingrid learned to live, function and do well in the United States.

Even though she was connected to school, to churches and with family members, she had lingering concerns.

“Because I had to adapt so much, I really wasn’t sure how my indigenous identity fit into all of this new life forged in Spokane,” Ingrid said. “I had to figure out what it meant to be an indigenous Maya woman, living in this world, speaking three languages and doing all these different things.”

This question led her to explore her indigenous identity and community more fully as a young adult.

Ingrid graduated from Whitworth University, where she learned about servant leadership and worked with many international students. She studied biology for pre-med.

From 2014 to 2016 after graduating, she moved to Guatemala where she continued to learn about what made up her personal history and identity. She appreciated being back in the place of her childhood, with the people, land, language and identity that she had known so well. She intentionally learned more about the history of Guatemala, the civil wars, dictatorships, indigenous movement and colonization so she could better understand her own history.

After living, working and learning in Guatemala for two years, Ingrid reflected, “I realized that I could only achieve this depth of understanding because I left my community. You don’t understand who you are until you leave your community, cement your knowledge about it and then have to defend it.”

She discovered that in either place she had lived, Guatemala or Spokane, people around her didn’t understand what the other part of her was about. She had expected that by going back to Guatemala as a young adult, she would “be my full self again.”

However, she found that she couldn’t fully adapt either here or there because she was truly a combination of two cultures that no one else could fully understand.

In Spokane, Ingrid wasn’t really a part of the Latinx community nor of the Native American. Although she explored both possibilities, she concluded with the rhetorical question, “How many indigenous Maya women are there in the United States? Are they working to reconcile their various identities as do I?”

In Guatemala, where she connected with indigenous Maya women who were steeped in their traditions, practices and customs, Ingrid concluded that these women “were strong, very strong, but they have a limited perception of the outside world that so often interrupted their way of life.”

Reconciling these two sets of roots and backgrounds has become Ingrid’s life work. Speaking about these two cultures, how they can intersect and learn from each other has become her work, as she can speak about these cultures, be heard and respected.

Ingrid is still learning how this will unfold for her in whatever task, job or context she may be.

However, she knows that she is an interpreter, a cultural translator. Her sense of identity is now centered in the roles as communicator, bridge builder and ambassador to help people understand one another.

Back in Spokane now, Ingrid has worked with local organizations as a community advocate to improve health care access for the Native American and Latinx communities in the Spokane area.

Next for her is to continue to learn, through work on a doctoral degree in public health, and to focus her service with indigenous health systems.

Ingrid’s goal is to help indigenous communities take ownership of their identity, traditions and direction in health care. She will use her own experience in navigating and drawing upon multiple sources of identity to assist others to find their own voice and to stand up for what is important and valued, even if that seems counterintuitive to larger systems.

Because of her development and learning about herself and her communities, Ingrid firmly believes that there is a path for speaking up and being heard.

“Our story has always ever been told by a colonizing point of view. It hasn’t been told by people like us,” Ingrid pointed out.

“This is a time in history where we, as indigenous women, have achieved by Western standards the education and credibility to take ownership of our identity and our culture,” she said. “We are the ones who can speak about our cultures and identities in a way that is respectful and honors our ancestors.”

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