



“MY CONNECTION IS TO GUIDE AND ENCOURAGE MELISSA TO ACHIEVE HER GOALS OF FINISHING COLLEGE AND LIVING ON HER OWN.”

DEB MCCARTNEY

It started with a text: *If there is something you want to talk about, let me know.*

Deb Nanda McCartney had seen Melissa Pacheco crying during a [Latina Leadership Initiative \(LLI\)](#) class. Deb’s text led to having lunch with Melissa and learning about her difficult living situation. Deb encouraged Melissa to set a goal of finding an apartment and began to send her listings and offer advice of what to look for. Within two months, Melissa was living in her own place.

Shortly after, she received Melissa’s text: *I want to thank you for everything.*

“It made me see that help in small packages can make a big difference,” Deb said.

Melissa remembers being curious about Deb, who brought food to the LLI classes and talked to the participants. Deb started asking Melissa questions. For 21-year-old Melissa, whose parents live in California, the relationship came at a key time. “I saw I could trust her,” she said.

Then around Christmas Deb gave each LLI participant an angel that said, “Believe in you.” With the holidays approaching, Melissa was feeling homesick and alone. “She gave me that angel when I needed it most,” she said.

Many people have been touched by Deb in similar ways. At the dental clinic she runs with her husband, she gets to know each patient personally. When she hears about a life-changing event, such as high school graduation or a family member passing away, she sends a card and often a small gift.

“She has a lot of compassion for people,” said Michelle Evans, the dental clinic’s business coordinator for 14 years.

Yet, when Deb first learned about the Latina Leadership Initiative while presenting on a health panel, she wanted to do more. “Those women were so amazing and so inspiring,” she said.

Deb set her own goal: to become more engaged. She served as a mentor for LLI and joined the board. Last spring she hosted LLI’s first fundraiser, a networking event for women. At the party, she met a young woman who, after a difficult childhood, received a full-ride scholarship to the University of Iowa. She invited the party attendees to send graduation cards after the event.

Making these connections has made a difference in Deb’s life as well. Her relationships with the LLI students formed as her daughter left for college. She said, “These young women got me through this past year.”

Today, Melissa has her own furnished apartment with a roommate. She is going back to college for a mass communications degree while working full time as a bilingual customer service representative. She attributes these successes in part to Deb’s guidance and encouragement. For example, Deb encouraged her to begin asking for a fee to appear at festivals as a former radio personality for 105.5.

“A lot of people talk the talk but don’t really do much,” Melissa said, “but if Deb says something, you will hear she’s done it already.”