Samantha Melendez graduated from Nazareth Academy. She has been involved in Sigma Lambda Sigma, Band, Marching Band, Youth Initiative, Student Athletic Training, Girl Scouts, and Environmental Club. Better known as "Sami," she is currently undecided about her major but is very interested in music. Ultimately, Sami would like to see herself doing something she loves to do every day. "I Speak American" was important for Sami to write because she feels directly affected by stereotypes.
I Speak “American”

Samantha Melendez

The name “Samantha Melendez” sounds real ethnic, and my physical appearance could convince most that I am very cultural. I stand at a towering five foot three inches with dark brown hair and equally dark brown eyes. There is also something else about me that is brown: my skin. Yes, I am of Hispanic descent but I was born and raised in America. I am a proud American and I do not speak Spanish, I speak American. I have embraced the American culture and have learned to appreciate what I have at hand.

All my life, people have expected me to speak Spanish or at least to have a jump start at speaking the Spanish language. I was raised speaking English and was rarely exposed to Spanish. I rarely visited my Spanish-speaking grandparents and when I did visit them, they spoke with mostly broken English, though what they were trying to communicate was clear. When I was younger I had very little interest in the Mexican culture, and it was not forced on me, so I never did make myself learn about it. Although some people would frown upon this decision, I believe I have embraced what it means to be a proud American.

Upon entering high school, like most of my friends, I signed up for Spanish class without ever having taken a Spanish class before. When I received my schedule as an anxious freshman I noticed I was placed into “Spanish accelerated.” It made no sense to me because I had no Spanish background; the only logical reason was that because I had a Hispanic last name, the academic dean assumed I had some Spanish background. I attempted to get this fixed, but I was assured I was placed in the right class. Within two weeks, I failed out of the Spanish accelerated class. I was then placed into a normal Spanish class. As the year progressed, Spanish never seemed to get easier. As my grade seemed to seep lower the teacher phone calls home seemed to increase. By the third quarter I had a “D” going in the course, and approaching
finals time, I was at a high “F.” I needed a “C” to pass the course. I studied my tail off and I passed my freshman year with a 1.73% for a “D.”

At my school we were required to take two years of foreign language and it seemed as if my Spanish career became a rerun from the previous year. Again as a sophomore, my grades instantly declined and phone calls started going home. This time, at the parent teacher conferences, comments like: “Get her through it and let her avoid foreign language for the rest of her life” were made. It still is a mystery how I passed that year but I got through it somehow, barely. I passed the course that should have taken me back to my ethnic roots by the skin of my teeth. Most people either think my failure is shameful, disappointing, or funny. I, however, think it is none of those: I believe I am an American and I was raised to speak American.

I continually say, “I speak American” because in America, we do have our language. Although it is derived from the English language, it has evolved rapidly into something completely different. I know this first hand because I had the opportunity to travel to England during my sophomore year in high school. There, I met some English men. As my friends and I talked to these men, we got on to the subject of how fascinating it was that we lived three thousand miles away and spoke the same language. The English men we were speaking to had no problem in quickly correcting us by stating “[You] don’t speak English, [you] speak American. It’s much different.” They continued to tell my friends and me that they were able to tell we were American and not European not only by our accents but also by our dialect and vocabulary. The American language has developed into something of its own, and I believe that should be recognized internationally. The American language is difficult and honestly, the vocabulary in it is changing constantly. The population has got keep up.

I do keep trying to dig up new things about my family history. Simply because I don’t speak Spanish does not mean I don’t care about the history of my family. Family history is fascinating and has allowed for me to be in the position that I find myself in today: my grandparents traveled here from Mexico in hopes to never return. Once they arrived in Chicago, they worked desperately to learn the English language. I am not one of those people who believe that everyone who comes to America should learn the language, but it is essential to succeed here. My family in America has strived to achieve success. Although it may
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seem like it is hard to communicate with my family, it really is not. They have been successful in learning the language and can communicate very well. Thus far in my short life, I have needed Spanish more to communicate with the American population than to communicate with my Mexican family. Although in the long run I would be more marketable in the job world if I were bilingual, my inability to speak Spanish has never been a barrier between my family and me.

The stereotypes need to stop, not just in associating tan skin with speaking Spanish but also with various other things. I am affected daily by stereotypes when I am approached by Spanish speaking people but am unable to help them. It boggles my mind that more fair skinned people aren’t approached by Polish speaking people and left in the same clueless position I continually find myself in. Communication takes many more forms than just words; throughout history people have communicated in various ways that did not involve words but actions. I am not incapable of communicating with people who speak Spanish, it just takes a tad more work. I refuse to let my lack of knowledge of Spanish, or any other language, hold me back, and there should be no reason for it to do so. I have been told my whole life that I should know Spanish because of the pigment of my skin, but I am breaking the stereotype and will find alternative ways to communicate and be successful. I am going to make the most out of the culture that I am an active part of, instead of wishing that I could live in Mexico and embrace that culture. I am not ashamed to be Mexican; instead, I am extremely proud to be an American.

Instructor Clare Foland's comments: All semester, Sami continually impressed me with her unique interpretations of the world and events surrounding her life. "I Speak 'American'" is no exception; in fact, in this essay, Sami courageously describes a perspective not often heard of and one that should be known. While Sami may have yet to meet other ethnic folks encountering the same issues she faces, she still helps us all learn to embrace our common identity as Americans.