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The head of the Madeira School reflects on being a change agent

By **Rachel Manteuffel** December 14, 2017

Pilar Cabeza de Vaca, 64, is head of school at the Madeira School, a private boarding school in McLean, Va. A headhunter in her native Ecuador told her she would fail at teaching internationally because she was divorced, had an odd name and was too short.

Madeira is this Washington institution, with their own ways of doing things for decades. You were brought in a few years ago presumably, correct me if I'm wrong, to kick some butt.

My predecessor was here for 22 years, an iconic head of school. I think the decision to hire me was because I was so different from her. I'm a change agent. We used to have a four-day week. Wednesdays were the days when the girls went off to internships. So what we did was change those internships to be five weeks of sustained work. Ninth grade is more preparation. They get digital citizenship, public speaking, small talk — which we never taught before, but now we're finding we have to because students are used to texting all the time.

Did you have a moment when you were a teenager when you realized the world is huge?

I grew up in Ecuador, and I went to the American school in Quito. [I went] to college [at Bryn Mawr College], being the exotic international student from this country that, back in the '70s, you wouldn't hear much about. Where you're located geographically definitely shapes how you view the world.

What do you wish had been different about your education?

That I'd taken more advantage of the moment and not taken it for granted. In my class of 108 seniors, I was one of three girls that got a college education outside the country. The majority of my classmates either went to finishing school or they just left high school and married shortly thereafter. From the Ecuadoran perspective, the U.S. in the '70s was a den of iniquity.

Tell me about the coup days.

I grew up under all kinds of dictatorships. The house where I grew up was catty-corner from a big military school. I could watch from my window as governments were thrown out. I remember their driving in black limousines and leaving on bicycles, because everything was confiscated. There were times when you had so many protests on the street that school was canceled.

You work with adolescents. My high school principal was Mrs. Butz, and some of us never got over that. You also urge bilingualism. Have you ever witnessed an aha moment, when [a student] realizes what your name means?

I announce it! When I first introduce myself to a new crowd I say, "I'm Pilar Cabeza de Vaca and I am the head of school, and in case you speak Spanish, I'm also the head of a cow."

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