

Fernando & Altagracia: Meeting in their Native Language

Every Thursday, while Altagracia Perez prepares for her visit with FriendshipWorks volunteer Fernando Salinas-Quiroz, she chats with her eight cockatiels. “Ellos me aman,” she says; “They love me.” And when Fernando arrives, an animated whistling competition begins.

“It has become quite ceremonial,” he says “We whistle and play with the birds and she says how much they like me - they are her babies.”

FriendshipWorks, which operates in Boston, Cambridge, Somerville, Newton, and Brookline, offers five programs including Friendly Visiting, Friendly Helping, Medical Escorts, PetPals (pet visitations) and MusicWorks (interactive musical performances for elders.)

In Somerville, where both Altagracia and Fernando live, 39 percent of adults - about 3,000 - are 65 + and living alone. Connecting people in Somerville is critical to reducing elder isolation, which brings serious health risks including increased [heart disease](#), diabetes, dementia, and more. The [epidemic of social isolation](#) heightened by the pandemic makes the mission of FriendshipWorks even more relevant.

For Fernando, who moved to Boston to teach at Tufts University, being a Friendly Visiting volunteer with Altagracia has been essential to settling in, away from his partner and his family in Mexico. “More than missing home, I didn’t want to be disconnected,” he explains.

Raised by his mother, grandmother and two aunts, Fernando says that he could always relate to older adults so having “an older pal” was natural for him. He also wanted a match he could walk to and speak Spanish with.

“Now, I have this weekly paradise - I can speak my language and share cultural things. It has been amazing!”

Altagracia agrees. “Si. Esta muy bien,” she says. “Fernando is like a son to me.”

A native of the Dominican Republic, Altagracia and her late husband moved to Boston in 1985 with their sons and her two brothers-in-law. When she lost her husband and son, Altagracia’s world shrank.

Although she has neighbors who kindly checked in, she felt the loss of her son.

Fernando's visits help: their conversations, accompanied by coffee and snacks, cover everything from Latin TV shows to her prized birds. Occasionally a Spanish-speaking neighbor drops in and the threesome share some laughs.

"We are creating a counter narrative to the current isolation by creating communities that care for each other. Organizations like FriendshipWorks provide this," Fernando says.

As a Latinx professor who works with non-traditional families like LGBTQ+, he explains that people can be doubly isolated because they may be rejected by their families. With Altagracia, he has felt welcomed, accepted, and cared about.

Altagracia unreservedly recommends connecting through FriendshipWorks. "One hundred percent! You get to chat and visit with someone else," she says. "When I know Fernando is coming, I wait and meet him. It gives me a purpose."

As for Fernando, he says, "I love how simple and meaningful this is. No phone - just being. I'm present and not rushed. This human contact is essential."

If you or an elder you know could benefit from a new friendship, contact FriendshipWorks at 617-482-1510 or visit us at www.fw4elders.org