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FIRST COAST CHRONICLES: Educator likes to teach his native tongue

Two decades ago, Colombian-born Olmes Corrales went to college so he could teach people how to understand music.

What he learned, though, was that many of the people he came across wanted to understand his native language instead.

"Years ago, a wealthy lady in Graceville [a Panhandle town near the Alabama border] hired me to tutor her son in music, but she wanted me to teach him Spanish as well," said Corrales, who teaches non-credit Spanish courses at Florida Community College at Jacksonville. "That's when I first began teaching it -- when I first learned that there would be a need for it."

It's a need that Corrales is staking his livelihood on.

Since 1998, Corrales, 46, has taught at FCCJ. Each semester, he says, his classes have filled up. His students -- who range from college freshmen to lawyers and doctors and traveling retirees -- have praised his work.

So now, Corrales is starting his own Spanish language school. That way, he says, he can offer classes with 10 or fewer people, craft lessons that mesh with corporate schedules, and help students absorb learning tricks in much the same way he learned English.

Eventually, Corrales says, he hopes to offer Italian and French. To contact him, call 318-8364.

"My passion for this, I guess, grows out of what I went through when I was trying to learn English," Corrales said. "It's a long process, and a hard process, but if you stay at it, you'll get to the point where you will no longer have to translate. You'll be able to think in that language."

Corrales knows about processes. He went through a lengthy one

himself before realizing that teaching his first language was what he wanted to do in life.

His parents came to the United States when Corrales' father, a Baptist minister, was sent to open a Spanish-speaking ministry in Lowell, Mass. Corrales moved to Jacksonville in 1980, in search of a warmer climate.

He held a number of jobs here before deciding to pursue a degree in music education at Florida Baptist Theological College in West Florida in 1991.

Corrales returned to Jacksonville in 1996. He was hired as a student adviser at FCCJ, and began teaching leisure Spanish courses there.

Corrales said he began to enjoy that more than anything -- especially when the reviews started coming in.

Which goes to show that when searching for a calling in life, sometimes, you find it by listening to your roots.

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