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Found in translation: Course offers abused immigrant and refugee women chance at a new life

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Mirna Coca Paz left a troubled life in Mexico, where she'd been abused, hoping for a better life in Canada. But her law degree wasn't enough to help her get work in Toronto.

She ended up in a shelter, broke and without motivation. She fell into a deep depression.

"I couldn't move for months," Coca Paz said, tears in her eyes. "It was very tough, but I am a strong woman, but wasn't ready to improve my life just yet."

Then some good fortune. A psychologist at the shelter recommended a translator training program and gave her a number to call.

"But it took me seven months to make that call," Coca Paz said, "to become a strong woman again," Coca Paz said.

Nora Angeles answered that call. She is the director of interpreter services at the [Barbra Schlifer Commemorative Clinic](#).



Students and workers with Barbra Schlifer Commemorative Clinic, which offers translation training to abused immigrant and refugee women shown, from left: Mirna Coca Paz, Nora Angeles, Marybeth Durante, Gulmira Myrzakmat and Shannon Giannitsopoulou.

LIAM CASEY/TORONTO STAR

The clinic was started to honour Barbra Teena Schlifer, who was sexually assaulted and murdered on Apr. 11, 1980 in the basement stairwell of her apartment in Toronto on the day she was called to the bar. Her legal friends organized the clinic to help the lives of women who have lived with abuse and violence. The clinic opened in 1985.

The program began in 1987 with funding from the province. Its main mandate is to help immigrant and refugee women, especially those who have been abused.

The course lasts two days per week for five weeks and much of their work after is for women who've lived with violence, like Coca Paz.

"You really are giving someone a voice," Coca Paz said. "I believe in justice and I believe in helping other women because so many great women have helped me."

Now, abused women such as Coca Paz have become leaders and role models, like her friend Gulmira Myrzakmat, who left Kyrgyzstan and also ended up in a shelter in Canada.

Like Coca Paz, becoming a translator has changed Myrzakmat's demeanour and outlook.

"I am like a different person now," Myrzakmat said, who was abused, but didn't want to get into the details. "I'm confident and I believe in myself again."

Both women heaped praise on Angeles, a de facto mother figure.

"I didn't realize how much the program meant to them," she said. "But it really has changed lives."

Graduates of the program have gone on to interpret in court, at shelters and anywhere else the skill is needed. They offer interpretation in more than 90 languages.

Coca Paz is looking to get certified to work as a translator in court, considered to be a very demanding and stressful job.

"Translation is very hard and it's very difficult to translate instantly, but I love it," she said with a smile. "But I am drained after, like a need a nap."

In 2008, the clinic applied for a funding program with [United Way](#) in order to expand their not-for-profit services into the for-profit world. It's recently had some success in the corporate world after signing an agreement with Pan Am Toronto 2015 to be 1 of 8 vendors for interpretation and translation services during the Games.

"This shows we can do professional work and the Games will be great for us," said Angeles, the program director. "But we're always looking for more work."