



A Multicultural Dreamer

Taynara Goncalves

Martha's Vineyard Youth Leadership Initiative

Ever since she was a little girl, Taynara dreamed of being a doctor. Growing up, she and her family lived a simple life in the little village of Mantenópolis, Brazil. As she walked past her grandmother's house, she loved smelling the luscious mangoes that she grew in big pots on her porch. "Everything we ate was organic and seasonal," she says. "When it was mango season, we ate mangoes. When it was banana season, we ate bananas."

However, with Brazil's economy in tatters, there were few jobs. Life was hard. Try as they might, it was tough for her parents to make ends meet. Often Taynara's family went without much food. For years, her parents saved every penny they could so they could search for a better life for their little family. And every night they prayed together.

People in the village talked about the island of Martha's Vineyard off the coast of Massachusetts. A few local men had traveled the 5,000 miles there, and found jobs building big homes for wealthy summer families. During the cold winter months, they'd return home and work on building their own homes. Since Taynara's father was a carpenter, he was eager to see if he might find a good job there too, so he could provide for his family.

In December 2001, they left Brazil with just a few things, filled with hope for their future. As they boarded the plane, 3-year-old Taynara held her mother's hand and looked up at her. "Does this mean I'll get to go to college and become a doctor?" she asked. Her mother smiled and said, "This means a lot of things if you are willing to try your hardest."

When they arrived, they were one of the very first Brazilian families to live on Martha's Vineyard. Life wasn't easy, especially in the winter. This little island had a tight-knit community of 20,000 year-rounders. They struggled in the long winter months to eke out a living. During the summer months, the island swelled to 100,000 people, including service workers from Ireland and Jamaica, who worked in the hotels. Then, after the summer, everyone went home. So, when Brazilians began to arrive with their whole families and to stay—and send their children to school—local people were nervous. They didn't think there would be enough to go around, especially in the winter months. Taynara remembers how it hurt when she saw how people looked down on her parents when they heard their accents.

Taynara's mother was relieved to discover that Elio Silva had opened a little shop with Brazilian foods, including the chocolate Caixa de Bombons that her father had bought her for special occasions. By the time twenty years had passed, there were several restaurants catering to the more than 2,000 Brazilians who now live year-round on the island. And Brazilian youth strengthened the high school's soccer team, which won the coveted statewide championships.

On her first day of kindergarten at the Oak Bluffs School, Taynara could feel everyone's eyes on her. There was only one other Brazilian child in her class. Taynara only knew four words in English: "Hi, how are you?" But with her warm smile, sparkling eyes, and gentle ways, she made friends. She practiced her English and picked up words watching movies on TV. To this day, Taynara greets everyone with this same message—and with the same intention. She sincerely wants to know how you are—which makes you want to respond in kind.

School wasn't easy for Taynara, but she pushed herself, studied hard, and always got good grades. "I constantly reminded myself that this was my big chance to achieve my dream," she says. "Whenever I was discouraged I reminded myself how lucky I was to be here and to have this opportunity." In high school, she was proud to be invited to join the

National Honor Society. Step by step, with laser focus, and along with her daily prayers, Taynara pursued her dream of becoming a doctor.

Then one day her teacher nominated Taynara to be a youth delegate to the Martha's Vineyard Youth Leadership Initiative (MVYLI). When she arrived at the orientation, she was surprised to see that the codirector of the Summit, Josue Cruz, was from the island of Vieques, Puerto Rico. Josue had been just 14 years old when he went to his first Summit in Vieques. Now in college, he was pursuing his dream of becoming a lawyer. "It was amazing to listen to Josue; he had faced struggles, but he wasn't defined by them. He persevered," Taynara says. "I knew then that I wasn't alone. That I can do this too!"

On the first day of the Summit, Taynara was fascinated to meet so many multicultural young people from islands like Vieques, Virgin Gorda, and Hawaii. Taynara felt that she had a new family of friends who were all ready to support her in realizing her goal. "It's awesome!" she says. "It gives you another family, a safe place to talk about important things—and to bring back to your school setting too."

At the Summit Taynara developed a greater awareness about climate change and sustainability. On tours they took to the Vineyard farms, she saw different crops than those she'd known in Brazil. She saw firsthand how climate change was contributing to coastal erosion. Waterfront homes were being threatened, and the frequent flooding of the Four Corners intersection by the ferry held up traffic for hours.

A few years later, Taynara visited her family's village in Brazil. "It was culture shock," she says. "Somehow it didn't feel real. It's a whole different world. Sometimes I wonder what my life would have been like if I'd stayed." During that visit she realized that climate change was taking a toll on her family's village. Extreme weather—first dryness from the lack of rain, and then torrential downpours—was washing away the precious rich topsoil so important for farming their crops.

As the first in her family to go to college, Taynara was excited and nervous. Her high school guidance counselor had discouraged Taynara from applying to a four-year college. "That's too much for you," he said, and directed her instead to a community college. But Taynara knew that she'd never become a doctor unless she started at a four-year college. "I was a good student, involved with extracurricular activities, just like the other students," she says. "Why shouldn't I be able to pursue my dream?" She walked out the door, never to return. It was the first time that she had felt the sting of institutional racism.

But in MVYLI's college prep program, she got the help she needed: tutoring for the SATs and help for her parents in filling out the financial aid forms. She enjoyed visiting a few different colleges to see which one might be best for her. However, as a "Dreamer" Taynara knew that she wouldn't qualify for scholarships. Her parents couldn't help her either. Fortunately, the Institute found a benefactor who offered to sponsor Taynara's education. It was the answer to her prayers!

Taynara's dream of becoming a doctor continued to be shaped with MVYLI's Job Shadow Day. Each year she spent an afternoon with one of the island's doctors: she shadowed family physicians, pediatricians, doctors at the health clinic, and eventually in the hospital's emergency room. She loved it! Each time her dream was renewed, even as she refined her goals. Thanks to her mentors, Taynara was able to see the wealth of career opportunities for premed students, and her horizons expanded.

For her MVYLI Sustainability-in-Action project, Taynara worked with other multicultural youth to envision and create the Institute's Multicultural Assembly at the Martha's Vineyard Regional High School. "Hi, I'm Charlayne Hunter-Gault, and I'm multicultural," said the honored speaker when the day came. "We are standing on the shoulders of giants," she continued, quoting from President Obama's Inaugural speech. "I am, they were, you are where you are because we are standing on the shoulders of giants." Then high school senior Jacob Lawrence spoke of his African American heritage, with roots in Ghana and Nigeria. "Thirty percent of the MVRHS students are multicultural," he told the assembled students. "Take time to get to know your friends." Then Ana Carvalho shared her experience of being a Brazilian student at MVRHS in 2008. "When I was a student, there was a lot of tension," she admitted. Now a senior at Tufts University, she invited the students to be open to each other. "I hope you will learn to appreciate Brazilian culture. Your Brazilian peers have a lot to offer."

For the next Summit Taynara served as a “Visioneer,” warmly welcoming the new youth delegates as they arrived. All through college, Taynara worked with Brazilian youth on Martha’s Vineyard, encouraging them to pursue their dreams too. She now serves as a Facilitator at each Summit, training young people with the tools they need to pursue their dreams for their lives, their communities, and the world. She enjoyed working with the Institute’s other Facilitators like Kassandra Cruz from Vieques, Puerto Rico, Namgyal Gyaltshen from Bhutan, Berta Pelaez from Guatemala and Patricia Pires Dias from Cape Verdes. “I love to get to know people that are multicultural,” Taynara says. “Each person has a different story, and each one of them will impact you in a different way. This island is filled with multicultural people, even though not everyone knows it. We are all a big family, filled with amazing stories to share with one another.”

Now a 23-year-old college graduate, Taynara was thrilled to get her dream job as a medical assistant and health educator at Island Health Care on the Vineyard. “I feel really blessed to be doing what I love, helping people, especially during the pandemic, when so many of my classmates are struggling to find any kind of job.” When the new U.S. Congress passed the Dreamers Act, Taynara knew it was in answer to her prayers. Now she can finally dream again—this time to go to medical school—and finally realize her dream of becoming a doctor. “I’ve been praying for this for a very long time,” she says. “And now? It’s really happening!”

Every moment is an organizing opportunity, every person a potential activist, every minute a chance to change the world.

Dolores Huerta

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