

[Social Soles]

Megan Rooney

Founder and Director,
La Escuelita Arcoiris

The Social Soles interview series is based on the saying, “You don’t really know someone until you have walked in her shoes.” We thought it would be interesting to begin each interview asking our guest to bring a pair of shoes that are significant to her. They can be the pair she wore when she stepped onto the plane, those she wore her first day in a new country, her baby’s first pair, the ones she wore every day in the market, the pair she wears the most often to school... What shoes will she bring?

We associate shoes with memories: good and bad. The question steers the path of the conversation. This route will show us a side usually not seen in the one we are talking with. A more

personal side. We are excited to see in which direction we are lead – by the choice in footwear and the memories stirred. Come. Let’s take a walk...

October brings cooler air, spicy smells, chills and thrills and the beginning of a season dripping with memories and tradition. Some of those traditions, like those surrounding Day of the Dead, bring flowers, foods, imagery and memories together in a swirling dance celebrating life. To better understand the Mexican traditions of Dia de los Muertos, we knew we needed to contact someone who has lived and embraced that tradition. We found all of that and more in Megan Rooney, the founder and director of Squirrel Hill’s La Escuelita Arcoiris.

Interview by Kiley Fischer



Megan: It changed my life. I was in a town called Pátzcuaro and it is famous for Day of the Dead because the indigenous peoples who live in these areas have a really, really, really thick history of arts and crafts. Each village has a different art that is their specialty. People come out of the hills with embroidery, with plates, all the imagery. I was in this town, it was pretty small then, but the market started filling up with these sugar skulls. Treats and sweets and food and the bread. And then a whole other market, the arts and crafts market, fills up with all the visuals.

I was actually participating in a marketplace as an artisan of just jewelry that I made, and I stumbled upon another marketplace – a plaza, just a whole block – that was just all flowers. Basically a block of flowers, flowers, flowers. Trucks and trucks just lining this plaza. I bought a little bit. I bought flowers and crushed up the petals and made a little picture of my mom. I bought candles, I bought sugar skulls and I did my own little Day of the Dead.

It’s called an ofrenda which is an offering, but we translate it as altar...but it’s an offering. I did my own and I was like, “This is why I came to Mexico.” This was maybe six months into my first trip and I was there two and a half years. I was twiddling around, selling jewelry at marketplaces and then this happened.

One of the motivations for learning Spanish was kind of my mom. She had passed right before I started my trip. Taking care of her and ushering her through the last days of her life let me free, I was 26, to say, “Okay, I’m going to go to Mexico and I want to learn Spanish.” It’s all very meaningful.

SBM: It sounds like your adventure really started as an exploration of yourself.

Megan: (smiles) Yeah, totally, yes. Here I am at Escuelita 20 years later.

SBM: What has it been like getting to pass on those traditions to the kids?

Megan: I love it. I love the openness of children. You say, “let’s all jump up and down” and they all jump up and down. Me and preschoolers go really well together. Just like learning a second language at such an early age is easier, they’re so much

more open to everything. When (a previous student’s) grandfather died when she was in seventh grade, she asked, “Mom, can we go and get sugar skulls from La Escuelita and do them for Grandpa? I want to do this.” It’s really powerful.

I do think it’s getting more and more popular in the United States. I think people are looking for more culture and embracing it because it’s universal truth. I just think it’s so beautiful because it’s made with deep love and spirit. This is happiness around something pretty sad. One of the beliefs is the living should go on celebrating as much as possible. They should not get mired down in the negativity of death. All of their arts and crafts are to uplift the human spirit. It’s such a better way to live your life.

SBM: Even just hearing you talk about it, it’s such an uplifting thing.

Megan: (nods and smiles) I’m not supposed to pass on traditions that aren’t mine, but I was there and I experienced it and I embraced it and I lived it. I hung around a lot of families and people who helped instill it in me. But, I don’t agree that you can’t celebrate it just because you’ve never been to Mexico. I think it can be meaningful for anybody. You take your own meaning from it and I think that’s what the kids do. Over the years, it does sink in. The joy, the celebration, the spirit sinks in.

SBM: I want to back up because I didn’t want to interrupt earlier: You were making jewelry?

Megan: Yeah, I hooked up with friends when I first got to Mexico, backpack traveler types from South America and Central America and Mexico and they took me under their wings and taught me some basic things and where to get the supplies. That really funded and guided my journey for two and a half years. I knew I wanted to just go. I wanted to say I lived places, so I needed to find a way to stay. Basically everyone was teaching English, which I could have done. I just happened across these friends who guided my way. It’s a really great way to learn the language and be part of a community.

SBM: That is so cool! That’s immersion.

Megan: I tell people all the time, my Spanish teachers in college told me that you just have to go if you want to be fluent. So I immersed

myself at 26 in Spanish. I am 100 percent immersion. Immersion for the children, immersion for the adults. If you go and spend six weeks in Guatemala and live with a family, you will be fluent.



SBM: It sounds like you and your shoes have been through a lot. If your huaraches could talk, what would they say?

Megan: My huaraches would say, “Hola”

SBM: Your own shoes have seen so much. If you could walk in anyone else’s shoes, whose would they be?

Megan: If I could walk in anyone else’s shoes, I would choose someone who lives in the United States but does not possess an American passport. I feel that to walk in another’s shoes is a great way to challenge our beliefs and prejudices as people of privilege. And if we all had the chance to do so, the world would be a kinder and more just place.

Megan Rooney started La Escuelita Arcoiris in her home in 1999 to share the benefits of learning a second-language at an early age with the community. The school is home to over 60 families with five classes for toddlers, pre-school and kindergarten. They also offer a summer camp.

For more information about La Escuelita’s programming and admissions, visit them online. They can also be reached by phone at 412-421-4787 www.SpanishLEAP.com

