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Bill Cirone op ed column

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Outside the comfort zone

Almost anyone who has ever had to address a group of strangers can attest to the fact that speaking in public can be a nerve-wracking experience.

But what if you don't even speak the same language as the audience you'd like to address?

2016 San Marcos High School graduate Angela Gladkikh knows exactly what that feels like. When she moved from Siberia to Santa Barbara County in the middle of her sixth grade year, she didn't speak a word of English.

"I felt very alone," Angela says, recalling that time. "I sat in that classroom, but understood next to nothing. I had no resources, except for an Oxford Russian-English dictionary. It wasn't until my eighth grade year that I began to feel some confidence."

In addition to her dictionary, Angela carried a notebook around with her. "I'd write a word or a phrase down in my notebook," she says. "Then that night I'd write out the definition. I'd spend the weekend reviewing the definitions I had jotted down." In time, Angela added a thesaurus to her list of handy references she toted around with her.

"I wasn't satisfied with learning the simple stuff," the soft-spoken teenager says today. Angela, who was a member of San Marcos's Health Academy and who is attending Georgetown University this fall to study international health on a pre-med track, tends to push herself. "By the time I reached the ninth grade, I really wanted to learn more complex words. I found them to be especially helpful in writing."

She was serious about improving her communications skills, so much so that, just two and a half years after arriving in this country, she joined the school newspaper. The experience was transformative.

"When writing became something I didn't *have* to do, I learned to really enjoy it," she says. "In the process, it really fed my interests in other subjects, and I found that with each day I was becoming more comfortable in both writing and speaking."

The extent to which she challenged herself to get outside her comfort zone wasn't limited to a writing desk, however. She ran for student office as a freshman — and lost. But that did not leave her deterred. Her junior year she was elected as a student representative to the school board, an experience she loved.

"I realized that the more involved you are, the more passionate you become about making a difference," she says. Her classmates recognized that passion, too: just before the start of her senior year, she was elected president of San Marcos High School's class of 2016.

Angela has every intention of carrying that passion for making a difference into adulthood. She spent her final three years of high school in Model United Nations, an educational simulation and academic competition "in which students learn about diplomacy, international relations, and the United Nations." When asked about her career aspirations, she answers without hesitation: the World Health Organization.

Angela Gladkikh is a living embodiment of the kind of tenacity, resilience, and commitment to excellence and service that make our schools and our community such a special, dynamic place. She is also a role model for us all.

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