



Name: Irene

Home country: Chile

Education: Political sciences at Open University in Korpilahti (Jyväskylä) for 2 years. Social services for 5 years at Itä-Suomen Yliopisto.

Moved to Finland: Irene was 8 when she moved to Finland.

Intercultural relationship: Irene is married to a Kurdish man.

Languages: Spanish, Finnish, English

“MY PATH”: my story before Finland, my goals and hopes

When Irene was 8, her parents separated, and her mother met a Finnish man, Irene’s stepfather. The couple decided to move to Finland. Back in Chile, Irene’s family was moving to different parts of the country quite often. So, the girl wanted her new life in Finland to be calm and stable. She also looked forward to exploring what snow was, as she had never seen it before.

FINNISH LANGUAGE

One of the first things that little Irene did after moving to Finland with her mother was learning Finnish. Her stepfather bought a study book for Finnish people who would like to learn Spanish, so Irene studied it in the opposite way. Her mother prepared lots of language tasks for her daughter to speed up the learning process. Also, Irene talked to her stepfather at home in Finnish. As a result, when it was time to go to school, Irene spoke Finnish so well that she did not need to pass “Finnish as a second language course” to enter her normal school studies. Irene believes that a Finnish-speaking environment at school helped her strengthen the language skills, as she had been practicing it daily. Eventually, the girl learnt Finnish faster than her mother, so she was an interpreter for her when they had to deal with something in Finnish.

Irene’s tip № 1: Immerse yourself into a Finnish-speaking environment as much as you can to improve your language skills (if you can’t find a group of people, listen to the TV and radio to get as much exposure to the language as you can)

RELATIONSHIPS AND NETWORKS

At school, Irene made friends with her Finnish classmates quite quickly. Her appearance was different from the majority of the Finnish kids, so her persona got much attention. Irene believes that the fact she moved to Finland as a child had a positive impact on her abilities to establish contacts with local children. According to her, being a kid, she was naturally curious about everything, and so were other kids at the school, that is why no extra effort was needed to make friends with someone - both sides were interested in meeting each other.

She also believes that apart from being curious, a good way to get to know people in a new country is to share a common hobby or activity that can be exercised in groups. Try searching for painting, ballet classes, themed meetups or discussion evenings in your area. In this way, it makes it more natural to talk to someone and you can be sure that they have at least one topic to talk about with other people -

their favorite hobby. Meeting new people can help create not only helpful contacts but even long-lasting friendships.

Irene's tip № 2: Be interested in people and find a hobby that you like to do.

EMPLOYMENT

When Irene was 13, she began working in a flower shop to have some extra money. While being a university student, she started working in telemarketing and has worked in the industry for 6 years. She found her first telemarketing job by sending as many applications as possible not aiming at any specific company or industry because she needed to cover her study expenses. She was employed quite fast because in Finland, if one knows Finnish and is willing to try working in telemarketing, it should not be difficult, as Irene says.

Irene thinks that support from family, friends or peers during one's job hunting process is essential. She recommends to directly ask others for help, as they might not know what one's going through while looking for a job.

Also, doing volunteer work can be a good way to "get your foot in the door". Irene herself was a volunteer at Familia being a group leader for the job hunting peer support group for Spanish speaking people. She finds this experience valuable for both her and participants. She was able to share her experiences, and they were able to receive guidance in their native language and meet their fellows.

Irene's tip № 3: Don't hesitate to approach companies of your interest and ask for volunteering opportunities. Be prepared to explain in what way you, as a volunteer, can be helpful for them.

INTERCULTURAL FAMILY/COUPLE

Irene and her husband have been married for 8 years now and have 2 kids. The couple met thanks to her sister who spent a lot of time in refugee camps helping people there and making friends. Irene's husband was one of those people. He appreciated her sister's kindness and invited the whole family to his place for dinner to thank them.

Irene admits that at first, they both were sceptical about their relationship and did not take each other seriously as potential partners. They were not sure if their relationship would work in the long run being aware of each other's different cultural backgrounds. Nevertheless, the couple decided to talk about their cultures, values, beliefs, ideas, and other issues that were important to them in their vision of a family before getting married and come to a compromise where it was necessary. That helped them avoid arguments or fights in the future, as they had a chance to clearly explain themselves. For example, Irene's husband is Muslim, so Ramadan, a month of fasting, prayer, and reflection, is integral to his life. Knowing how important this time for her husband is, Irene supports him and also fasts together with him.

The family speaks Finnish at home, as her husband learnt Finnish very well during his time here. Irene also considers teaching their kids Spanish when they are a bit older, although they hear both Spanish and Kurdish at home almost every day and acquire some passive language knowledge, when Irene or her husband talk to their parents and relatives on Skype.

The family cooks Finnish, Chilean, and Kurdish food at home. According to Irene, their kids are happy being an intercultural family because they have more celebrations than a person with one cultural background. They celebrate occasions from both parents' cultures and the Finnish culture.

Irene says that being married to a Kurdish man affected a perception of her own cultural identity. Previously, she did not feel a strong sense of belonging to Chilean culture, as she left the country quite

young, and tended to associate herself with Finnish culture. Whereas now, she does not identify herself with just one culture anymore, being open to a mix of aspects from different cultures.

Irene's tip № 4: Take time to talk to your partner about your cultures, values, beliefs, vision of a family, and ideas of life. This is a great way to understand better your differences and similarities and come to a compromise, if necessary.