

Name: Tanja

Home country: Finland

Occupation: Tanja has been working at Familia ry for 10 years as a coordinator for intercultural couples

Languages: Finnish, English, Spanish

Intercultural relationship: Tanja has been together with a Mexican man for almost 20 years. They are parents of two children.

INTERCULTURAL FAMILY/COUPLE

Tanja and her husband met in Mexico where she was living during her gap year, traveling around the country and learning Spanish. The couple moved in together and planned to stay in Mexico for a long time but unfortunately Tanja's partner did not get a permanent job contract in the city where they lived. It meant that he could be sent to another city for work anytime. Taking into account distances in Mexico, moving to another city can sometimes be equated to moving to another country due to a different climate, people, culture, and accent. Tanja was still enrolled in university in Finland and had to come back at some point, so she could not follow her partner to the north of Mexico where he was sent to. They had been in a long-distance relationship for about 5 years but with time, the distance started affecting them and the couple decided that Tanja's partner would move to Finland.

It was important for Tanja to see her future husband's behaviour in his "home environment". For instance, she observed what he was like with his family, friends, and at work. Being aware that social roles and identity often change once a person comes to a new country, she is glad they met in Mexico and had lived there for some time.

When Tanja and her partner started dating, they experienced difficulties with regards to others' opinions on their relationship. Tanja says she got an impression that the Mexican society saw all the foreigners as tourists just having fun instead of looking for something serious. At times, it was emotionally hard for the couple to get through such comments but this experience has made them stronger.

Tanja says that she and her husband have been raised in completely different cultures and environments and it has an influence on how they see ourselves, each other, relationship, family, and life in general. However, they found a way of compromising avoiding giving up their core values. For example, if they have different opinions on children's upbringing, they always discuss them together until they are able to identify the cultural or personal reasons or motives behind their opinions.

Tanja's tip № 1: Do not let others' negative comments affect your relationship with your partner. If there is something that concerns you, discuss it with your partner. Getting through such experiences together makes your couple stronger.

FINNISH LANGUAGE

The couple speaks mostly Spanish to each other. Tanja speaks Finnish to the children and her husband usually speaks Spanish with them, as it is important for him to use the language of emotions with the kids. When the whole family is together, they usually speak Spanish.

Tanja's husband speaks Finnish well, although in the beginning he was struggling with the language. He does not speak any English, so it was a burden for him when Finnish people would switch to English in conversations knowing he was a foreigner, as they supposed it could be easier for him to communicate in English rather than in Finnish. On the other hand, Tanja believes that in this way, he had no

temptation to switch to English communicating with the Finnish people. So, there was an additional motivation for him to learn Finnish as fast as possible since he was forced to use the language.

Apart from the Finnish language courses that he attended, he also learnt Finnish with some of Tanja's relatives and at work. Sometimes they spoke Finnish at home but were frustrated knowing that they could have explained themselves better and faster in Spanish.

Tanja is convinced that for those who come to a new country as an adult it is almost impossible to learn a language to a level of a native speaker. Even though one can speak fluently, it is difficult to know the context, certain people, and situations where one or another language style can be applied. It is challenging to learn this skill as a foreigner, compared to native speakers who have been practicing it from childhood. However, it should not discourage and prevent one from learning Finnish, as it is a crucial part of integration. She points out that it is not only getting a job that makes one happy in a new country. Integration to a culture and society are also big parts of life. Even if one manages to do their work in English, there are always social circles at a workplace where communication happens mainly in Finnish. Not knowing at least basics of the language can easily make one become left out from conversations between colleagues.

Tanja's tip № 2: Learn the basics of Finnish, even if you manage to work in English at your workplace. Speaking at least some Finnish lets you participate in conversations between your Finnish speaking colleagues and feel a part of the collective.

EMPLOYMENT

Tanja's husband has a rare profession, so getting a job in Finland was not particularly difficult for him. When he just moved to Finland, he participated in an integration programme, which included a practical training that participants should find themselves. He contacted a company, which was across the street from the place Tanja and he lived at, and asked for a trainee placement. He proved himself as a trustworthy and competent employee and has been working there for 13 years already.

At the workplace, he had some difficulties in understanding social life. The language was an issue at the beginning as well, as he could not participate in some conversations between colleagues or take part in social activities. Interacting with customers in Finnish also must have been a big challenge for him, Tanja assumes. What helped him keep up working was being brave and continuing talking to people, not being afraid of making mistakes.

For the job seekers in Finland, Tanja recommends making themselves aware of their strengths and skills. If one has a profession that they cannot continue with in Finland, it can be a good idea to participate in a workshop aimed at analyzing one's skills and competences. If one has a hobby that can potentially bring income, it is worth thinking of converting it into a profession.

Tanja's tip № 3: Be open and creative about job hunting. If you have a hobby that you never associated with work before, think of a way of doing it professionally and earning money.