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Media Release

Pulse of CCSD - Luis Torres Clavell

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Communications**

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Charleston, SC – When asked about his childhood, Luis Torres closed his eyes and smiled. He described it as paradise. Mayaguez, situated at the edge of the ocean, on a disputed bay where it is assumed Christopher Columbus landed, is the small town in Puerto Rico that he called home. He learned Spanish there, a language that would serve him well in life and in his career. Today, Torres works as an interpreter/translator in Charleston County School District's Office of Translation Services.

Torres was growing up in New Jersey where the only language he knew was English. At the age of seven, Torres' parents returned to Puerto Rico, where he would get a crash course in Spanish. At that time, only business people spoke English on the island. The elementary school he enrolled in created a bilingual program just for Torres and his brother to learn Spanish.

"Spanish was probably easier for me to learn at that age because I was immersed in it," said Torres. "My mother spoke English, but my father only spoke Spanish. So once in Puerto Rico, we all slipped into speaking only Spanish."

The family lived on Torres' grandfather's property; fishing was their livelihood. They rose every day at 3:00 a.m. to set the fishing nets. By 6:00 a.m., they pulled the catch. Every morning the fish were doled out to the less fortunate who lived on and around the property.

"Some of these families didn't have money and couldn't survive on their own," explained Torres. "We would go door to door passing out the fish. My grandfather insisted that the next in line would be the elderly, and then pregnant females and mothers with young children. The rest went to our family and to the market."

The market was about a 30-minute ride from home and served three of the biggest tuna factories in the United States at the time. At that time, according to Torres, Puerto Rico produced 83 percent of all the tuna consumed in the United States.

"Once the catch was distributed all of the children went back to the house and cleaned up, ate breakfast, and went to school," said Torres. "Puerto Rico still conformed to the Spanish way of life. At 2:00 p.m., school ended and the siesta started. All business was put on hold. Literally, everyone took that time to eat a snack or lunch, and sleep or rest until 4:00 p.m. Then back to work until 6:00 p.m."

Mostly nuns, who were not keen on left-handed individuals, ran the Catholic school Torres attended. Torres quickly learned to become ambidextrous because religious beliefs caused the devout to frown upon the use of the left hand.

"What else do you do," asked Torres. "You conform. The nuns would use their ruler very efficiently if you did not."

Torres was a very bright student, excelling easily in academics. He skipped the sixth grade and was sent to a brand new middle school for gifted and talented students. It was there he learned he had a photographic memory, which boosted his success as a student. Again, he skipped a grade and sailed through all of his classes with top scores, especially in science and history, his favorite subjects.

In 11th grade, Torres started taking classes at a nearby college while simultaneously completing high school. He was taking physics and astrophysics and hoped to receive a government-funded scholarship to complete his studies. The scholarship was a lottery and not based on economic need. Unfortunately for Torres, his name was not drawn.

"At the time, we had become coffee farmers," said Torres. "We lived way up in a mountain. It was a 30 minute walk to the school bus, then a 45-minute ride to the bottom of the mountain, and a twenty-minute ride to school. Then reverse that at the end of the day. We were starting the farm so we had no workers, we had to do it all ourselves."

Torres didn't have the means to finish college and was too young to actually find a job or be hired at 17 years old. He chose to join the Franciscan Monks and became a seminarist apprentice.

Torres went to seminary for almost a year and a half, he went to college for theology, divinity and medical majors, but returned home to care for his ailing mother. As she healed, he planned his next step in life. He decided to join the military.

Torres had just turned 18 and was not only navigating the difficulties of Navy boot camp but also relearning 12 years of forgotten English. It was in boot camp that he learned the difference between chic's and chicks. More importantly, in just 20 years, Torres would serve in more roles and on more missions than one could fathom.

Torres' dreams of becoming an astronaut were deflated when he learned his body could not handle the changes in pressure. However, his commanders saw his talent and he became a nuclear electronics technician. His first set of orders was to serve on the first nuclear submarine, the USS Nautilus. The sub was decommissioned eight months into his tour and Torres walked across the pier to a surface ship called the Charles P. Cecil, known for breaking the blockade during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

In one mission, Torres helped to retrieve the American ambassador from Haiti during a time when the government there was in dire turmoil. The dangerous missions continued into Ethiopia, Somalia, and areas of Central America.

The Charles P. Cecil was decommissioned and Torres was sent to dismantle the USS Nautilus. Upon completion, he became part of the crew of the USS Spiegel Grove out of Little Creek, Virginia. The tour consisted of testing prototypes such as new versions of combat vehicles and experimental weapons.

"That was a good tour where we got to see the failures and the wins," said Torres. "That ship is now a reef in the gulf."

Torres' career took many twists and turns from Boston, back to Little Creek to Grenada where he became a communicator for special operations. Torres served as a translator and interpreter for Special Forces, the FBI, and the CIA, all while guarding prisoners on his ship.

The prisoners were eventually dropped off at Guantanamo Bay and a week later Torres arrived in Beirut, Lebanon.

It was 1983 and Torres was still serving as a communicator with special operations, and as a photographer. He was there when a suicide bomber had broken through the front security point on base and drove a truck with an estimated 2100 pounds of explosive into the front of the building used as barracks. The lives of 241 marines, sailors, contractors, and foreign military were lost.

"It was a sad time," said Torres. "We watched the explosion and were basically the first people on the scene to provide first aid to those that could be taken care of."

There were enjoyable times for Torres as well. He met dozens of famous people and dignitaries when they came to visit the troops. His experiences in the military also mapped out his future career.

Torres is a natural educator. He taught Spanish to the troops on the ship he served. He was eventually sent to San Diego for electronics engineering school where accelerated engineering courses were taught over a six-month period. He returned to Great Lakes and taught electronics for five years. Only the best of the best completed it successfully.

"I was teaching in six weeks what the average college would teach over the course of several years," said Torres. "My students really had to apply themselves and work very hard. There was a high attrition rate because of the difficulty of the material being taught. It was considered one of the hardest schools."

The last leg of his military career placed Torres in the repair division as a Class A micro-miniature repairman. He received his accreditation and certification to work as a micro-surgeon for microchips.

"Some of the microchips that the military uses cost hundreds of thousands of dollars," said Torres. "As repair technicians, my colleagues and I saved the military millions of dollars."

Torres made his way to South Carolina by way of the Naval Weapons Station in Goose Creek where he calibrated rockets and torpedoes, as well as communication equipment. He also taught loading and lading of weapons and explosives.

"Once I officially retired, we stayed in South Carolina mostly because my wife said she didn't want our children to grow up as military brats," said Torres. "Also, Charleston looks so much like my wife's hometown in Puerto Rico, called Carolina, pronounced Ca-ro-lee-na in Spanish. We have been here now for 24 years."

Torres decided to use his free time as a volunteer at his children's schools, and he particularly enjoyed being a guest speaker in Veteran's Day and Memorial Day events and giving military-themed lectures and speeches to various community and civic organizations. He even worked as a substitute teacher.

Torres' experience in the classroom later landed him a position instructing Border Patrol agents at the old Navy Base and participating in drills as a role player.

Not done ensuring his career was a diverse one, Torres went into banking, handling foreign accounts for Portuguese, Spanish, and French-speaking clients.

He carried those talents into the evening by teaching Spanish to Americans and English to immigrants.

Then Torres went to work for the third-largest defense contractor in the world as a designer in electronic communications.

"I designed communications suites and satellites," said Torres. "There are a little over 25 U.S. Navy Ships, vehicles, and buildings whose suites cabling and wiring connectivity were designed by me."

There were a few other career stops along the way before Torres joined the CCSD translation services team.

"It is rewarding and exciting in a way," said Torres. "My position as a translator/interpreter is exciting because I like working with and for children. Most importantly, it is exciting because I like helping people. That is the reason I became a monk. To see the look of relief on a person's face is rewarding. Knowing that the person is thinking 'someone understands me', that alone is worth it."

Angela Rush, Director of the Office of Translation & Interpretation Services (OTIS) said Torres is a valued member of her team.

"Mr. Torres is an amazing person," said Rush. "He works tirelessly to provide impeccable services to families and his professionalism and passion for perfection is seen daily in his work ethic."

OTIS provides language support to assist in the communication of academic information between schools and parents to increase engagement in school activities and district-wide functions. This full range of language services is designed to help in CCSD's mission of providing a comprehensive educational experience to prepare students for college, career, and life.

"Our work is important because as an instructor, or teacher, it is a struggle to communicate with parents that don't speak your language," said Torres. "It is a struggle for the parents to communicate and made even harder when you put the child, who speaks both languages, as an interpreter. That child is going to interpret only to their capacity. Our work is very necessary. As a military person, I can tell you that a lot of the hurt and wars happen because of a lack of communication. People couldn't or don't know how to talk to each other."

Torres said he foresees the department continuing to grow by leaps and bounds.

"Every time a new program starts within a school or the district, needs for communication requests will grow," said Torres. "My department will be called upon to not only understand a foreign language but the educational aspects of what is being communicated."

CCSD now employs bilingual secretaries in the schools that are trained by OTIS.

"The Spanish, Latino, and Brazilian populations in the Lowcountry continue to grow," explained Torres. "I see us being an extremely productive group for many years to come."

"Mr. Torres has a kind and calm demeanor that helps to comfort families," added Rush. "He uses his experiences to mentor others new to the field of translation and interpretation."

Torres looks back on his life and career with pride and appreciation.

"The best part is that my wife has shared so much of this life with me," said Torres. I am grateful for that. The only thing I always wanted to do is hang-glide and be an astronaut, but that's okay."

(A Spanish version of this article can be read [here](#))

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About the Charleston County School District

Charleston County School District (CCSD) is a nationally accredited school district committed to providing equitable and quality educational opportunities for all of its students. CCSD is the second-largest school system in South Carolina and represents a unique blend of urban, suburban, and rural schools spanning 1,300 square miles along the coast. CCSD serves approximately 49,000 students in 88 schools and specialized programs.

CCSD offers a diverse, expanding portfolio of options and specialized programs, delivered through neighborhood, magnet, IB (international baccalaureate), Montessori, and charter schools. Options include programs in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), music and other creative and performing arts, career and technical preparation programs, and military.