

## **“Eskala - Go Climb!”**

*By Elmira Galiyeva, SOS Local Immigration Partnership*



Claudia was on a backpacking trip in British Columbia, far away from her home country-Mexico. It was 2003.

“I really want to learn English”, she shares, “I wanted to find someone who could help me with that, and I did”. She met Margaret, a lady from Germany, who owned an organic farm in Oliver. “I will teach you English if you teach me how to cook Mexican dishes”, offered Margaret. Given very basic English language skills that Claudia had at the time, it was not surprising that she said “yes” although she had no idea how to cook. Margaret ended up teaching Claudia to cook. This is how her journey in the valley began...

Let’s fast-forward a few years... On a sunny afternoon Claudia Reyes Nunez met Richard Rodrigues (a.k.a. Ricky) from Osoyoos. Richard’s father is Portuguese and his mother was originally from Quebec. They went to Mexico but soon realized that it was harder for Ricky to settle there than for Claudia in Canada. They moved back to the valley and got married in 2010.

It was not an easy immigration journey. Contrary to popular belief that all immigrants are leaving behind hardships, Claudia’s story is different. Before she left Mexico, she received her Industrial Engineering degree and was ready to start a professional career in this highly respected field. She explored options for getting her engineering license in Canada but realized that it would require too much time and, most likely, she would have to move to a big city to find a job. She was in love with the Okanagan valley, so that was not a good

option. So she decided to stay. For a few years she worked at a fruit packing facility in Osoyoos. She was a manager but, because of the existing work culture, was paid less than a forklift operator. She knew that this was not the right place for her. On top of it, she lost her mother and was feeling very sad and vulnerable. Change was long overdue...

Claudia and Richard moved to Penticton. Claudia reached out to the South Okanagan Immigrant and Community Services (SOICS) to connect with the community. She worked at a few stores before "True Outdoors", where she became a manager and found her true passion. She loved her work, met fellow climbers and made friends. But one day the store owner informed Claudia that the store will be closing down very soon. A golf-clothing boutique where she worked on the weekends was closing as well. Claudia was in despair.

The owner of the boutique asked Claudia: "Why don't you open your own outdoors store? You obviously know a lot about this business and love it. Nothing stops you from following your passion." Claudia agreed. The hardest part was to convince Ricky but he came around and supported his beloved wife.

In September 2019 "Eskala Mountain Sports" opened its doors on Front Street in Penticton, and has been doing very well since then. Claudia's store offers Canadian and European brands of high quality outdoors products at affordable prices. "Eskala" came from the Spanish "escalar", which means "go climb!" For me, it creates an image of Claudia full of determination and readiness to pursue her dream. "Go climb!" she told herself. And she did.