Maria Reyes moved around swiftly at the front of the large room, speaking enthusiastically about a subject that comes naturally to her: caring for elders with dementia. Her hands and facial expressions showed her passion. She vividly explained how to approach and react to various developmental scenarios from flat stares to hallway pacing and confusion.

Her audience, a group of employees at an assisted living center in Two Harbors, Minn., listened intently, sharing their own experiences throughout the discussion. As a quality improvement nurse of behavioral health for Ecumen, Reyes shows her trainees how to live in the reality of their patients, putting elders at ease and allowing their world to make sense. It’s a position Reyes climbed the ladder to get to; it never felt like work, she says. Caring for people has always come first for Reyes, because of the heavy responsibilities she had as a young teenager in Puerto Rico.

“Every time I take care of someone, I think about my grandma. She had lupus, and I took care of her,” says Reyes. “That’s when I learned about honoring and supporting elders.”

After her grandmother passed away, Reyes moved to the U.S. at 16 years old to stay with her father and found school suddenly difficult and frustrating. The problem wasn’t the curriculum. She had been a 4.0 student in Puerto Rico. The problem was she only spoke and understood Spanish and quickly landed in special classes.

“That’s how I ended up getting off track,” says Reyes, explaining how she went on to get pregnant at 17 and dropped out of school to care for her family. During that time, she taught herself new words and correct pronunciation with an English dictionary to communicate in the new reality that surrounded her. She went to work as a blackjack dealer for several years, but she became the one who was dealt a challenging hand of cards.

About a decade after having her first child, she walked into Wisconsin Indianhead Technical College a divorced 28-year-old who lost her job and had no high school degree. She was in search of a career that could allow her to solely support herself and her two children.

“I really wanted a GED,” says Reyes. “I wasn’t thinking that I could aspire to be a nurse.”

A group of three women at WITC changed that.
“When I first met Maria, she was a timid, young girl. I sensed her fear, but also strength in her that maybe she didn’t realize she had,” says Ann Charbonneau, an academic affairs assistant. “It takes strength to walk through the front door of a college and ask for knowledge. There was something special about that girl.”

Charbonneau, along with student services assistant Kim Davidson and Bunni Haslerud, a former Success Center technician, took Reyes under their wing. Charbonneau says the three witnessed Reyes’s self-confidence grow as she completed her GED, and together, they helped Reyes structure a course to complete the nursing program.

“I knew in my heart of hearts that Maria would become a leader in the medical community someday,” says Charbonneau.

Reyes pushed herself to finish her schooling while holding down a job and taking care of her two boys. With no other family living in the area, community members quickly stepped-up and became Reyes’ support structure. Some neighbors watched her kids as she attended classes; others pressed her to constantly reach her potential.

“WITC really offers a lot to the community. It’s good at supporting you as an individual and realizing you are an adult. There is no connection like it at other colleges, and it’s a connection that continues today. We need to have more colleges like that,” says Reyes. “Even the nursing instructors that worked with me, they were just so committed to what they were doing, and every time I see red ink, I think of them. She always told me I could do better, and I can.”

The practical experience also allowed Reyes to narrow her career options within nursing.

“The clinical experience I received at WITC was really rich. It made it very easy for me to determine what my career path would be,” says Reyes. “It was the beginning of a never-ending learning experience. It opened up an appetite for self-learning. It doesn’t stop at college.”

After graduation, Reyes found a company she could grow in and says its values met hers.

“Ecumen empowers their employees to go against the grain and to grow as professionals,” says Reyes. “It’s really leading the way in the way we care about elders. There are so many nursing interventions that are underutilized, there’s a lot more room for nurses to bring their intellect and their common sense.”

She says Ecumen and the “Awakenings” program is taking a more non-pharmaceutical approach to care, where appropriate.

“We have severely over-medicated our seniors. We’re changing that culture. We train other organizations on how to do it differently,” says Reyes, saying although she loves being at the bedside of elders, she feels she can change more lives and touch more people through training staff at various facilities.

She says people are often surprised someone in her position held “only” an associate degree.

“You set out the tools, but it’s really up to us to embrace them and make the most out of them. Learn how to embrace the opportunities in front of you and really use them,” says Reyes. “No matter where you are today, if you really want something and you want it bad enough, it’s attainable. You can achieve anything you like. That’s really the takeaway.”

Charbonneau agrees.

“The adversity she has overcome and the strength she has inside that tiny, little body is comparable to Hercules. Beauty, brains and brawn – that’s Maria.”
Coming from Puerto Rico, Reyes has also gone against the grain of her culture, but has gained respect and pride from her family there. “They always keep validating the fact that they always knew I would do big things. They are still in their cultural ways. My identity is not culture. It’s a big and lonely step when you come from such a strong culture. I’ve done everything taboo,” says Reyes. “I always knew from being a little girl, I wanted to be at home with my kids. At that time in my life, that’s what I was supposed to be doing, and I was very blessed to have the opportunity to stay at home with kids, but I am equally blessed to manage family and career myself. Culture is a great thing, it’s a valuable thing, but being true to yourself is more important. As a woman, we have so many opportunities available to us and to remain true to who you are as individuals.”

She says when she speaks to certified nursing assistants and others, she helps them to realize their potential and ability. She always asks them their barriers, and then shares with them her own story of overcoming challenges. “No one had a story to share with me when I did this, but it would have been a lot easier,” says Reyes. “There’s not a cookie cutter mold for success. You don’t have to have a nuclear family. Success is really dictated on the person’s perception of themselves and their attitude. It doesn’t have to happen right out of high school. When you’re ready for what it is that you want, focus on it and it’s yours.”

Reyes also helps them realize the community support that is available to help students. While she pushed herself, her success is also due to those who supported her. She now has turned around to help others by watching their kids and keeping her friends motivated to continue on their path to a career. “You have to help yourself too. Your community can be a great support for you, but there comes a time when you have to give back,” says Reyes about her experience. She believes the biggest obstacle holding people back from pursuing their dreams is simply fear.

“It’s their own fear of the unknown that stops them from taking that first step. Eliminate the fear. You’ll get through,” Reyes says. “No matter what life has given them so far, the future is still unwritten. I just fed my soul, and I woke up and now, I’m awake.”