

A portrait of Raquel, a woman with dark hair pulled back, wearing a colorful patterned top and large hoop earrings. She is smiling slightly. The background is a plain wall with a whiteboard partially visible. The image is overlaid with a dark blue background on the left side, which contains text and social media information.

RAQUEL

31 years old

The Way English

 *thewayenglishcourse*

TO FULLY LIVE LIFE AS A LESBIAN, RAQUEL HAD TO FACE rejection by her family and her church. Her parents, who are very religious, did not accept their lesbian daughter. Likewise, the church did not welcome her. With no family support and very little professional direction, Raquel faced a difficult financial situation. In the beginning, she had no furniture or basic kitchen appliances, such as a refrigerator, which made her daily life extremely complicated and left no room for planning. She worked as a freelance English teacher, but she went about it in a disorganised way and had great difficulty surviving day-to-day. But Raquel persisted so she could have the freedom to be who she is and to live the love that she felt - and still feels - for her partner.

IN SEARCH OF FINANCIAL AUTONOMY

Raquel taught on her own, but her expertise as a teacher was not enough for her to achieve autonomy, as she did not know how to organise her business or her personal expenses. She lacked management knowledge and financial education and, in order to obtain them, she enrolled in the second Micro Rainbow Brazil entrepreneurship course, which began in May 2016. Her main hope was to break with the economic fragility that exposed her to discrimination and dependency, since she had to rely on the support of people who criticised her life and subject herself to very difficult working conditions.

Through the course, Raquel learned how to manage her business, *The Way English*, as well as her personal finances, acquiring as much knowledge as possible to develop her business plan. A week after graduation she decided to face her biggest challenge: putting the business plan into practice, a process that was, she says, at times painful:

“I only became aware of it when it was over. Now that it's on paper, it has to be put into practice. It was a struggle in some ways - knowing that my plan was there and that I had to reach a certain number of students, but how do I get there? So I got to marketing... It was painful, but it contributed a lot to my business”.

The business plan she developed exposed weaknesses in her business practices, such as lack of appropriate pricing. But she no longer saw herself as someone who needed to pay the bills in order to be independent - she came to see herself as an entrepreneur. She realised that she needed to grow as well as her business.

EMPOWERMENT

On this new path, Raquel has already taken significant steps towards autonomy and no longer feels exposed to violent situations. In less than a year, her income has improved considerably, providing access to basic home goods such as appliances, furniture and a telephone. This directly impacted her quality of life and expanded her professional possibilities. However, having access to leisure activities had the most impact on her self-esteem. Taking her partner to the theatre, to the movies and being able to travel in Brazil were the greatest achievements in her view. After so many struggles together, they can finally enjoy what they have achieved.

As well as improving her professional life, Raquel has sought other sources of empowerment, such as LGBT advocacy groups. These new support networks have provoked further questions and fostered a new understanding of her place as a lesbian. Her family's prejudice remains, but today she limits her interactions with them in order to avoid conflicts. She found an inclusive church where she feels completely accepted, and began to



surround herself with people who do not discriminate against her. She believes that some of her clients are prejudiced, but she acts naturally, without hiding her sexual orientation, and she has had no major problems. The looks she used to get when she was with her partner in public are no longer a source of shame, but of pride. Raquel has taken full control of her life and feels free to express her love.

LGBT SOLIDARITY

Raquel knows that there is still a long road to full rights for LGBT people. Public policies that promote full citizenship regarding gender identity and sexual orientation are very rare. In the labour market, LGBT professionals do not have access to equal opportunities because many people do not want to coexist with diversity. Precisely for this reason, as a businesswoman, Raquel gives priority to service companies operated by LGBT people. And this preference will soon apply to employees too, as she embraces LGBT community belonging as the primary criterion for hiring. It was her LGBT friends who supported her

in the most difficult moments, such as when her parents abandoned her, and she formed a new family with them. According to Raquel, maintaining this support network is fundamental for the empowerment of other lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transvestites and transsexuals. She concludes:

“Many of us need to move away from our families and other LGBT people end up becoming our family. We find solidarity among ourselves”.

Raquel's experience shows that financial autonomy can be extremely influential on one's quality of life. The lack of support from her family meant she did not have access to basic subsistence goods, since she had not yet achieved financial independence. But it also showed her that she was not alone. Raquel had unconditional support from her partner and some friends, and she built new family ties with them. Now that she is in a new stage of her career, she wants to reciprocate by giving opportunities and support to other LGBT people. ■

