Sometimes speaking the same language makes all the difference. Ricardo, like many who seek treatment for substance use disorder, was frightened. He had emigrated from Cuba in 1994 with 14 others on a handmade raft. They were intercepted by the US Coast Guard and Ricardo spent a year in Guantanamo Bay, held as a political refugee. He was eventually sent to Portland to start a new life.

Things started out well. Ricardo worked as a busboy, sold ads for the Hispanic Yellow Pages and enrolled in Portland Community College to improve his English skills. But his drinking and drug use spun out of control for about 15 years. He always felt like an outsider, but finally, at Central City Concern (CCC), a recovery mentor, Ramon, asked him in Spanish, “How do you feel?”

Ricardo replied, “I'm afraid.”

“Ok,” Ramon said, “I've got 25 years clean and I'm afraid, too!”

Ricardo immediately felt at ease as part of Puentes, CCC's culturally specific Spanish-language recovery program. Treatment in his own language “was like music,” he says. “And that’s when recovery started for me.”

Ramon has remained Ricardo’s mentor for more than eight years. He helped Ricardo find housing, engage with medical care, get his immigration paperwork in order, and gain work experience and job skills. After working with CCC's Clean & Safe program and getting help from CCC's Employment Access Center, Ricardo worked as a bilingual specialist in CCC's Hooper Detoxification and Stabilization Center where co-workers encouraged him to become certified as a Spanish-speaking recovery mentor and a drug and alcohol counselor.

Ricardo jumped at the opportunity to be part of something bigger than himself and help other Latinos who “were in the same situation I was, facing the same barriers I had been facing: immigration, loss of family.”

One thing Ricardo has learned in his own work, he says, is compassion across cultures. “Even with my accent!” Ricardo says, remembering one client at Hooper—a grumpy man—who complained he couldn't understand a word from Ricardo's mouth. But that same man asked for Ricardo to be his caregiver, and not long after, Ricardo ran into him on the street. “This guy,” the man said, pointing to Ricardo, “He saved my life. I don't understand what he says, but he saved my life.” [CONTINUED ON PAGE 2]
“That’s what compassion means: not only understanding, but what you feel.”

“That’s what compassion means,” Ricardo explains. “Not only understanding, but what you feel.”

Reconnecting with his family has been one of the most important parts of his recovery. He remembers first calling his mother in Cuba while he was working with Clean & Safe and explaining that he was cleaning the streets. “Good!” she replied. “It’s time you clean up your mess!” With the encouragement and support of his mentor, he made his first visit home after 18 years. He saw how much the silence that came with his addiction had affected his mother, who told him that now she can sleep peacefully at night.

Being a part of his three children’s lives is important to him, too. He is proud of their success in school and their dreams: one son wants to become a lawyer, another a computer engineer, and his daughter—inspired, she says, by her father—wants to be a social worker.

Ricardo is now a recovery mentor and case manager at Puentes. “Every day,” he says, “I see somebody getting treatment or employment help or going to the doctor. Every day I see CCC changing somebody’s life.”