

## About our Kichwa Instructor Urku Deborah May

Urku Deborah May is a Vassar College graduate and lifelong community social justice activist who taught sociology at UMass Amherst. She worked at ARCS in Westchester County as their Regional Trainer until retiring in 2015, providing mandatory HIV-related trainings for the NYS Health Department AIDS Institute to community service providers in seven upstate counties.

For nearly seven years, Dutchess County native “Mama Urku” has been living in the homes of Kichwa-speaking indigenous Kichwa Otavalo families in their traditional rural mountain communities. Here she has worked closely with Kichwa Otavalo-led educational, health and cultural organizations, co-founding the NY-based [Wichana Foundation](#) in 2019 to provide these select indigenous projects with much-needed financial support from foreign donors.

When Mama Urku began learning Kichwa in 2017, she discovered that virtually all Kichwa-learning materials and Kichwa-language instruction rely on Spanish language delivery, making it extremely difficult for monolingual native English speakers to learn this beautiful indigenous language from professional Kichwa teachers. Based on this challenging experience, she developed a unique beginner-level Kichwa-language curriculum, started a Kichwa-language school, and published a 230-page Kichwa-language book in English called Gringos Learn Kichwa: Preparing Native English Speakers to Speak Otavalo Kichwa. The classes and the book are rare resources, perhaps the only created by a native English-speaking professional educator that employs our own cultural pedagogy and bypasses the Spanish language to introduce Kichwa language and culture to other English speakers using only our English language.