

LATINO TEACHERS INSPIRE THEIR STUDENTS; EDUCATORS PRESENT GOOD ROLE MODELS FOR SUCCESS.(News)(Statistical Data Included)

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Daily News Byline: Yvette Cabrera Daily News Staff Writer

When history teacher Marco A. Torres was accepted into a doctoral program in education at Harvard University, there was no question that he would turn it down despite the prestige.

The way Torres saw it, he was needed more in the halls of San Fernando High School than the halls of an Ivy League university. Growing up, Torres, 29, saw very few Latino teachers in his schools, something he wanted to change for the generations that followed.

"I wish I had a Mrs. Reynosa who could listen to my concerns, someone I could go back and forth (with) between Spanish and English," said Torres, referring to Patricia Reynosa, the Title I coordinator at San Fernando High School in Pacoima. Reynosa was part of the first wave of teachers in the mid-1970s who benefited from affirmative action programs and returned to teach in their communities.

"I think it's wonderful when you can be that bridge," Torres said.

Torres is a bridge too. Like him, Latino graduates of the public school system who become teachers fill a void in the classrooms of the Northeast Valley, he said.

Latinos made up only one in 20 teachers back in 1975, according to district statistics. By 1998, the number of Latino teachers had grown to one in five but remains far from their share of enrollment, which is 69 percent.

Latino teachers say the 1990s have been a time when more and more of their peers have joined the field.

For decades, schools could count the number of Latino teachers on one hand, said Richard Ramos, a San Fernando city councilman and a third-grade teacher at his alma mater, Morningside Elementary School in San Fernando.

"There was such a disparity between the teachers I had and my culture that I knew there had to be change," said Ramos, 30.

"I was never really able to associate very well with my teachers because we came from two different worlds. I think we as Latino teachers, we see these children and we see ourselves. I always say if I can do it, then anybody can do it," Ramos said.

Nora Cadena, a senior at San Fernando High School, said Torres was the mentor who guided and encouraged her to continue with school after she found out she was pregnant.

"Especially when I got pregnant, he just knew what was going on - the culture, the background," said Cadena, who is headed to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in

the fall. He knew what my parents were going through. He was there to tell me that it wasn't all over."

As a teacher, Ramos said the strongest message he tries to send at Morningside, where 99 percent of the students are Latino, is that his parents emigrated from Mexico and that he is an example of what his students can accomplish.

"The whole culture of the school is changing, and it's for the positive because we can associate with these children and we can cross that cultural barrier that wasn't able to be crossed before," Ramos said.

At Morningside, 19 of the 60 teachers on staff are Latinos who grew up in the community, said Assistant Principal Jim Kennedy.

"This particular area has that tradition of people coming back," said Principal Nick Vasquez.

The Moreno sisters are an example. Lidia Moreno, 24; Hilda Moreno, 22; and Estela Moreno, 25, all grew up in San Fernando, graduated from Occidental College in Eagle Rock in the '90s and returned to the Northeast Valley to teach.

"All throughout our education in the Valley we didn't have any Latino teachers," said Estela Moreno, who graduated from San Fernando High School and now teaches Spanish at Monroe High School in North Hills.

When a teacher like Arleen Gonzales can tell her students at Sylmar High School that her father, a trash man, and mother, a grape and walnut picker, managed to put six children through college, the message resonates, she said.

"You're more real to the students; you're not just another adult that is spewing to them," said Gonzales, who teaches in the science magnet program at her alma mater. "I can say, yes, I sat in that room two doors down and I had Mr. Smith as my biology teacher or . . . our drill team did this when I was here."

The connection to the students often goes beyond the classroom. If you're one of Gonzales' students, you're likely to run into her at the bank, at Mass or buying an ice cream cone at the local drug store.

"They see that you really are a part of the community, and so they ask, if you are here, Why are you here if you have choices?" said Gonzales, 38, who resides in Northridge but still runs all her errands in Sylmar, where she grew up.

"I believe if you're going to be investing your time and your money and your love, it's always more comfortable and it's easier to be investing in those from where you came from," said Gonzales, a graduate of Stanford University.

After the first wave of teachers who returned to teach in their communities in the mid-1970s, a second wave of Latino teachers, students of the first wave, entered the system in the mid-1980s, Reynosa said. There was a sense of responsibility that drove many of these teachers back, she said.

"My community invested a lot of time and money in me. I knew that teaching would be my payback," Reynosa said.

Of the 190 teachers at San Fernando High, 27 are Latino alumni, she said.

The increasing number of Latino teachers returning to the Northeast Valley coincides with

a nationwide increase in education degrees conferred on Latinos.

From 1985 to 1995, the number of Latinos who received master's degrees in education increased by 60 percent, while the number of bachelor's degrees in education increased by 35 percent for that same period, according to the most recent statistics from the American Council on Education.

Having grown up in Pacoima, Torres said he knew his challenge in teaching his students was relating his lessons to their lives.

“What does dropping a bomb on Hiroshima, how does that relate to the little Chicanito from Pacoima?” Torres said. “If my goal is for them to learn, I have to make this connection. I have to make the information meaningful for the students.”

The message has connected with Torres' students, who said they see in him more than just a teacher.

“Mr. Torres totally understands the situation we are in. He's always saying we're running a marathon, but we're running it with someone on our back,” said senior Angie Garcia, 18, from Sylmar.

Too often those who grow up in tough communities leave the minute they get a chance, Torres said. Very few of his friends went to college, and those who did never looked back, he said.

“They figured they got out and wanted to be as far away as possible. They said they struggled enough and were not about to go back in and struggle again,” said Torres, who now lives in Sylmar.

San Fernando High School junior Natalie Hernandez, who wants to be a judge, wasn't going to return to the Northeast Valley after graduating next year, but after seeing the example set by Torres, she changed her mind.

“I've changed a lot. . . . I see so much potential for change, and there has to be more people who can make that change,” said Natalie, 16. “Maybe I'll even come back as an administrator.”

Cadena also plans to return to San Fernando because she wants the number of Latino role models to increase.

“I think of how more kids could have been helped if we had more teachers like Mr. Torres in the future,” Cadena said. “Just seeing others (make it) helps you.”

CAPTION(S):

6 photos

PHOTO (1) Marco Torres, a teacher at San Fernando High School, sits in a class taught by Michael Karaborias, one of his former teachers.

John McCoy/Daily News

(2 -- Bulldog edition only) Teacher Arleen Gonzales, a graduate of Sylmar High in 1978, leads a biology class at her alma mater.

Shaun Dyer/Special to the Daily News

(3 -- Bulldog edition only) Richard Ramos teach`es third-graders at San Fernando's Morningside Elementary, where he attended as a youngster.

David R. Crane/Daily News

(4 -- Bulldog edition only) Michael Karabogias shows San Fernando High colleague Marco Torres photos of past pupils.

John McCoy/Daily News

(5) Richard Ramos

(6) Arleen Gonzales

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