



*By Rosina M. Gallagher*

**Y**es, Yes, We can Do it! “We can access early childhood education, participate in accelerated and enrichment programs in the elementary grades, qualify for honors courses or selective enrollment high schools, obtain scholarships into private academies and top universities, graduate from professional schools, and become entrepreneurs or join the corporate world. We can do it all! Yes, and we can do it by assimilating into this great global community and contributing our values, work ethic, creativity, language, and ways of life to enhance multicultural understanding!”

This is indeed the message reverberating in Latino circles where I have had the privilege to meet personally with families across the country over the past ten years. The rising hustling and buzzing may be due to the dramatic growth of the Hispanic population throughout the USA, increased awareness and outreach from school districts to uncover hidden potential among minorities, and the fact that immigrant groups are assuming greater responsibility for staking a claim to what may be fully their right. Whatever the reasons, the trend is encouraging and is proving beneficial to underserved student populations, school districts, ethnic communities, and the nation at large.

#### **PERSONAL STORIES**

Over a decade, when engaged to speak and participate in national and state conferences, I have made it my mission to per-

sonally take the pulse of the progress of the local Latino community in accessing educational opportunities. The stories families have shared individually and in panel discussions have been enlightening and inspiring. As you read the anecdotes that follow, I encourage you to reflect on each one. Similar stories or a different perspective may spring to mind from your own personal or professional experience.

#### **Blanca in San Diego**

...is a single mother of two boys. Raised by distant relatives, she grew up outside of Monterrey, the second largest city in Mexico, and was “adopted” by an American family as a teenager to help care for two children. Blanca decided to become independent as soon as she became a U.S. citizen, marrying shortly thereafter to an older man who took her back to rural Mexico. Mistreated for not bearing children, she returned to Southern California. Alone and hurt, she sought to become a mother through “arrangements” with a friend. She succeeded in bearing two children but struggled to sustain them, living in run-down housing, and at times in the family car or in shelters. Able to finally complete her GED or high school equivalency certificate, she gained a better job. She also began to volunteer at school, and discovered that her first born had high aptitude in math. With the children in school, receiving public assistance, and working as a domestic, she is currently completing an associate degree at a

community college and applying to enter a university work-study program. She continues to vigilantly oversee the boys' participation in the gifted program.

**Commentary:** The immigrant experience is varied. Blanca apparently was fulfilling a need for an American family to have childcare. In my experience, this is frequently how young women from other countries manage to immigrate, and the transition to independence can be difficult. In Blanca's case, she was unable to reintegrate into a rural community with firm customs and mores. It is inspiring to see her resilience amidst adverse life circumstances. By her love and dedication to the children, and guidance from educational and social agencies, she is acquiring new skills and bolstering self-confidence and personal worth.

### **Dolores and Rogelio in Charlotte**

...come from a good-sized city in Durango, Mexico, and have lived in the USA for 23 years. Dolores is housekeeper in their church, and her husband does light building maintenance there now. Formerly a chef in an Italian restaurant, he is recovering from a stroke. They have two daughters: one is enrolled at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill; the younger one attends the International Baccalaureate or IB program in Charlotte's public school system. Dolores comments, "We don't earn much money so my daughters have to work and study. But this is good because they are learning to become independent and self-sufficient. We don't understand the educational system. We know about the IB program a little because Julie went through it, but it would be nice if we could communicate better with the schools. Sometimes parents are afraid to speak up or ask questions."

**Commentary:** Time and again I am convinced of the importance of religious and community agencies in building support systems for immigrant families. Hence, it is incumbent upon schools to establish communication with relevant groups. Dolores' comments also bring to mind the need to encourage family participation in schools. When one child gains access to a special program, this may open the door not only to other family members but to relatives and friends as well. It is also notable that Latino parents are encouraging daughters to become independent and self-sufficient.

### **Marilu and three sons in Kansas City**

...came from Uriangato, Guanajuato, to join her husband, only to discover shortly thereafter that he was supporting a second family. Separated for several years now, she has been working in a laundry company. "I wish I could study English but I have to work as much as I can to pay for immigration papers for all of us." Asked if her carpenter husband is paying child support, she states, "Not always regularly. Thanks to guidance of the Guadalupe Center, I have been able to work with the public schools so that all three of my sons are doing well. Daniel is in 5th grade. Salvador, in 7th grade, just received an E. M. Kauffman Foundation four-year scholarship to a university of his choice. Alejandro is in the 10th grade at the Charter High School and participates in a college preparatory program."

**Commentary:** While a majority of the Latino families I have met are intact, the consequences of fathers immigrating first and spouses and children several years later, may result in the emergence of new relationships for either parent, but more frequently for fathers. It is interesting to note, however, that male spouses often struggle to support both families—particularly if it involves wiring money back home. A second issue evident in this case, is the constructive relationship existing between a community agency and the public school.

### **Humberto in Minneapolis**

...is currently in his first year as the Latino community liaison in one of the suburban school districts. As a 14-year-old, Humberto immigrated to the United States when his brother was returning from a family visit in rural Michoacan. "Yo estaba cuidando chivos en el rancho y trabajando en construcción cuando se podía," or "I was taking care of goats and doing construction work when it was available," he comments. When this young man entered Southwest High School he knew very little English. Encouraged by one of his teachers and the school counselor who saw promise in his initiative and perseverance, Humberto joined an established community agency that helped him to learn English but also to make friends, attend cultural fieldtrips, recreational activities and lectures by community leaders. Within two years, Humberto was one of a few Latino students able to qualify for the International Baccalaureate Program. As a scholarship student at the University of Minnesota, he continued to volunteer tutoring at the agency, later became youth leader, and eventually math teacher at the alternative high school.

**Commentary:** Relationships—yes, it is personal relationships that can make a difference in a young man's life: a brother, teacher, counselor, coach, mentor. Humberto's journey from caring for goats on a ranch to acting as community liaison in a large city was a swift transition thanks to guidance from concerned individuals along his path. A personal commitment is evident, as Humberto continued for several years to counsel other young people as he had been mentored in his teen years.

### **Manuel and Azucena in Metropolitan Chicago**

...have become community leaders at the local and state levels after only six years of residence in the United States. They began by advocating for their three daughters who are fairing well through the public elementary gifted program and high school academy. Originating from Acapulco, Guerrero, Azucena has a nursing certificate and Manuel has experience as a supervisor in industry. Both struggle in English but distinguish themselves in oral and written communication in Spanish. Each has been head of the local Bilingual Parent Advisory Committee, a group that was instrumental in getting the school district to continue the gifted program despite budgetary cuts. Azucena was recently successful in securing the position of Community Representative, "I have learned so much advocating for my daughters that I truly feel qualified to be an intermediary between families and the schools. For example, we have just established a special Adult



Basic Education program in partnership with the Mexican Consulate,” she states in Spanish. Both take turns participating in district governance activities and organizing parents to join the state gifted organization advocacy efforts to restore legislation and funding for Illinois gifted children and youth.

**Commentary:** Once personal family responsibilities are met, helping others often results as a natural consequence. This anecdote also illustrates how parents may become bridges for the school community—even as they struggle to develop proficiency in the English language!

### Francisco

...is currently in the Boston area pursuing a graduate degree in economics at Harvard University. He is the product of a Mexican family who raised three sons in the Pilsen community of Chicago. The couple came from Jalisco and Guanajuato, Mexico, in a search for better educational opportunities for the boys. Initially a factory worker, father became a bilingual substitute teacher and mother a volunteer, then tutor and eventually a community organizer in the elementary school the children attended. Educated in the public school system, the eldest son attended the University of Illinois and is now a mechanical engineer. Francisco obtained a scholarship to Harvard where he graduated in 2005 and later worked for Microsoft for several years. Now married to a medical student of Chinese and German descent, the couple has

decided to return to Harvard. “Ever since he was five years old,” recalls mother, “Francisco learned from television that Harvard was one of the best universities in the world, “Yo voy a estudiar en ese colegio cuando sea grande, mami,” or “I’m going to study in that school when I grow up, mom.” So, he is.

The youngest son has a different story. Although he was also the recipient of a four-year scholarship to a large university, he apparently lacked the survival skills or maturity to live up to program expectations. But, mother adds, “He lost a battle, not the war, and has continued forward.” He just completed two years in a community college and is applying to a university engineering program. The family is confident he will do well and do what is right.

Ah! And mother, now in her late 50s and a breast cancer survivor for nine years, was recently awarded an associate degree in Early Childhood Education—with honors—from St. Augustine College, an institution of higher education that offers programs in English and Spanish. Mother currently works with preschool children in an established Latino community organization where she continues taking sewing classes on Saturday afternoons, “to relax and keep learning,” she exclaims enthusiastically.

**Commentary:** This is one of many family profiles that have enriched my professional experience. Strong family support is apparent as Francisco’s parents immigrated with guidance and financial help from mother’s older brother. Respect for education, hard work and effort have been clearly inculcated. Love of



**The *Please Don't Leave Our Children Behind Day* Campaign was instituted in 2006 to advocate for legislation and funding to support programs and services for gifted students. On April 17 this year over 700 students and parents met with legislators at the State's Capitol in Springfield.**

learning is indeed a value that may overcome hardships and the inevitabilities of life. It is important to note the great contribution that an institution has made in the lives of innumerable Latino families. St. Augustine College was founded in 1980 by the Episcopal Diocese with the mission, “to make the American system of higher education accessible to a diverse student population, with emphasis on those of Hispanic descent; to strengthen ethnic identity; to reinforce cultural interaction; and to build a bridge to fill cultural, educational, and socioeconomic gaps.”

### PROFILE OF A SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL DISTRICT PROGRAM

Finally, it is important to recognize the efforts of a public school district in serving its second largest student group (39.1 % Latino). In the early 1990s, the Chicago Public Schools established several magnet centers with bilingual instruction for identified gifted Latino students learning English as a second language. Funded initially through state categorical funds and federal grants, these centers have continued with local support because of their success in promoting student achievement. The schools have graduated hundreds of youngsters into selective enrollment high schools and private academies. These young people have succeeded in acquiring English proficiency while developing competencies in the content areas and their home language. They have also been guided to better understand their

own identity as citizens in two cultures.

Consider the remarks of one sixth grade student who, when testifying before the Illinois State Senate, summarized the benefits of her participation in a gifted bilingual program. “My name is Angela. My parents come from Honduras in Central America. My father is a welder and works two jobs. My mother volunteers at school. We don't have much money. My brother Miguel received a four-year schol-

arship to Philip Exeter in Boston. I am a good student, too. We speak Spanish at home but I am learning to read and write in both languages. I was very excited to be one of two girls in my class to meet Astronaut Commander Eileen Collins of NASA. Today, I am speaking to you from this side of the Senate floor, but tomorrow I hope to be in one of your seats. Thank you for supporting our gifted program.”

### CONCLUSION

It seems fitting to conclude this article with Angela's quote, as the future remains in the hands of her generation. Judging from the stories cited, it is a future full of promise. Young immigrants are learning to become competent, confident and caring individuals who are prepared to work together to build fulfilling lives, thriving neighborhoods and a global community. Let's continue to guide and support them along the way. ■



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