

Celebrating Education: It Starts in the Home

Let us be grateful for parents, teachers who inspire their students and community organizations that give out scholarships

By **Kat Avila** | Published on LatinoLA: October 10, 2011



When I first entered Cal State Fullerton with honors, my mom's response was not "Congratulations!" or "I'm so proud of you." I heard, "Girls don't need a college education as much as boys." My brother's response didn't fall far from the mother tree. He said women didn't have the brains to become doctors. He wasn't being mean. He really believed it (and he's a Republican to this day).

And my dad was a male chauvinist. No wife of his was going to work outside the home, even if she wanted to. Maybe he thought it would compromise his masculinity if the neighbors saw his wife working outside the home. It never occurred to him that Cinderella might have dreams of her own beyond cooking for him and sweeping out his castle.

In another world, I would have been a lawyer and my sister would have been a great medical doctor. This realization came to mind when I woke up one morning after a strange dream. Although we went on to overeducate ourselves, our initial driving impulses became shadows of their original selves. It was if our dreams were too big to be sustained for long without mentorship and greater financial resources.

Still, we both have college degrees. This is probably because my father loved books and the collecting of them. My father would take us kids to the library with him every week.

We also inherited a streak of stubbornness. It helped. Like many students, the path to my degree was on and off. When I finally walked off the platform with my B.A. diploma in hand, my sister was there to witness it. My parents were probably at home watching TV.

Do you celebrate your child's education? One mom showed me a photo of her children around what I thought was a birthday cake with lit candles. I was wrong. They were celebrating her son's starting kindergarten and her daughter's starting second grade. Her actions remind us that supporting the process of learning, this lifelong journey, is as important as the end result.

If you don't have children, perhaps you mentor a teenager or a coworker. One of the most important people in my life was my mentor Herlinda Sullivan, whose father had once been the mayor of Zacatecas, Mexico. I met her at a Toastmasters meeting. At that time, she was the founder and owner of Orange County's first sperm bank, the Fertility Center of California. Did I tell you she also had a wonderful sense of humor?

Additionally, Herlinda cofounded the Orange County chapter of MANA (Mexican American Women's National Association). Over the years, MANA's members have mentored and encouraged Latinas to stay in school. They have given scholarships to the college bound.

Many of the well-paying jobs in California are only open to the college educated in math and the sciences. There are not enough qualified Americans. Therefore, these positions are often filled by immigrant engineers from Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and South America.

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So there are Latino engineers, but they often blend in with the other ethnic groups. The most visible Latinos are the janitorial crew. One time I sat in a lunchroom when the janitors were on their break. They were talking in Spanish about trying to get ahead and the importance of education in that equation. We were surrounded by immigrant engineers with Ph.D.'s, some of whom were millionaires.

Hispanic/Latino Heritage Month ends on October 15. Public education is part of our American heritage. In a political and economic climate where access to quality education and higher education is threatened, parental and community support becomes even more critical.

Let us be grateful for the parents who read to their children. Let us be grateful for the teachers who inspire their students' curiosity beyond superstition and national borders. Let us be grateful for the community organizations that give out scholarships.

Let us celebrate education today.

Kat has never stopped studying. She is against government-issued vouchers that sabotage and take away money from public schools.

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