

# San Antonio Express-News

## Retired Army Officer Connects with Teens

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In a room of more than 300 Memorial High School freshmen, motivational speaker Consuelo Castillo Kickbusch realized something was starting to happen.

The retired U.S. Army lieutenant colonel had come to the Edgewood School District campus recently for a one-hour talk as part of the Yo Soy El Army Tour, a Hispanic-focused initiative of the U.S. Army. She talked about avoiding drugs and about respect for oneself and one's family. But she also listened.

"She brought up a lot of stuff that happens to us," said Moses Contreras, 15. "She pretty much gave chills down my spine because it felt like she was talking to me."

Kickbusch heard their voices and their stories. She saw that their tears were real.

"I have a lot of friends who are into gangs and stuff, and for the first time I actually saw them listen," said Lisa Marie Hernandez, 14.

The response from the students was so strong that Kickbusch came back to Memorial Dec. 6 for a three-hour seminar that she hopes will be the first of a series of visits to the school.

Kickbusch, a nationally recognized professional speaker whose engagements can cost up to \$10,000 an hour, decided to come back to Memorial for free.

"I went to Memorial like I've done in the past, but something happened this time that just riveted me," she said. "I felt it inside of me to go beyond what I'd been asked to do."

When Kickbusch came to the school in October, she did not know that one Edgewood student had been killed in a drive-by shooting earlier this year a few blocks from Memorial or that two other students were expelled for taking guns to Kennedy High School, another Edgewood campus. She didn't know that last spring police had to break up a large fight in the main Memorial hallway.

"We'd gotten some bad press," said Memorial Principal Pat Zambrano. "I just wanted the students to feel good about themselves and talk about their problems and get it out."

Kickbusch did know that the school had gotten a bad reputation, but she also knew that its classrooms and hallways were filled with smart, good kids.

"There are geniuses in the barrio, more than one," Kickbusch said. "I know that there is truly a significant amount of untapped potential in schools like Memorial."

Kickbusch knows firsthand about starting out in the barrio.

Before rising to the level of highest-ranking Latina in the army's Combat Support Field, Kickbusch grew up in a Laredo neighborhood known as El Rincon del Diablo, the devil's den. She wore secondhand garments and for years had no idea that clothes came on hangers.

"I grew up in a community very much like the Memorial community," Kickbusch said. "When I went to speak at Memorial, I knew I was coming home because that is what it's like."

After she retired in 1997, Kickbusch started Educational Achievement Services, a leadership and motivational group that she operates out of her San Antonio home. She has received numerous awards and accolades for her work.

Talking about how she made it from Laredo to a comfortable Northwest Side house, Kickbusch pulls out a photograph of her parents.

"These are the salts of the earth," she said. "I am a product of them, even if I am in O (The Oprah) magazine."

It was hard work that got Kickbusch out of the neighborhood, into college and then into the Army. And there's hard work ahead for Memorial students, parents and educators if they want to see their school change.

"Many of the children don't have a vision, they don't have a plan. They are hurting really deeply and they don't know how to articulate that hurt, and it turns to anger," Kickbusch said.

"Where do you put all that and be excited about calculus?"