

# Promising Practices Conference Provides Teachers Energy, Hope

## Migrant Education News

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*By Editor Ken Harvey*

About 600 educators participated in this year's Promising Practices Conference, taking away new enthusiasm and skills to address the challenges presented by migrant students and others struggling to keep up.

"The evaluations have been positive," says Program Supervisor Sylvia Reyna. "The conference provides the expertise of experienced master teachers who have had success in the classroom with struggling students. It is a resource for teachers to hear from their colleagues about practices that really work.

"We've gotten emails from participants who say they went away with a sense of energy and a sense of hope that they will be able to work effectively with these students," says Ms. Reyna.

Indeed, dozens of educational experts provided their insights during the conference held this year at the Yakima Convention Center.

Former migrant student Consuelo Kickbusch, born and raised in a tiny barrio in Laredo, Texas, described how she overcame the challenges of poverty, discrimination and illiteracy to become the highest-ranking Hispanic woman in the U.S. Army.



"I was that child who was struggling," the retired lieutenant colonel said. But she was inspired by her parents' words and their sacrifices. They migrated to work the fields and lived in a boxcar for five years because "they saw what others couldn't see," she said. Her parents could see what their family could achieve through sacrifice and American opportunities.

"Education is the American dream," her father said. And Consuelo grew up excited to go to school. But educators were not excited to have her.

"We can take the role of being gatekeepers or dream-makers," Consuelo told conference participants. "Which will we choose?"

Educators in Consuelo's early life chose to be gatekeepers. But luckily her parents built her self-confidence adequately to handle the attack.

"I was an Aztec princess because that's what my father said, and he never lied," she recalled. "In that little two-bedroom house, I was given a sense of pride."

She recounted the day a teacher felt compelled to cut Consuelo down a notch by telling her she was poor and from a terrible neighborhood.

She ran home to tell her father, but he refused to accept that label.

"You are not poor," he told Consuelo. "You are rich. You have values. You have culture. You have tradition. You have opportunity. All children have the right to the American dream. You are not poor, and don't you forget it."

When Consuelo declared her "wealth" the next day, she was punished for lying.

She made it through elementary and middle school, however, by being socially promoted. In high school she was put into general math and learned how to operate a cash register instead of into algebra, and she was counseled to register for other vocational rather than college-prep classes.

"Teachers expected poor Latino students to drop out," she said. "They could not see past poverty to promise and potential."

When Consuelo tried to attend a college orientation session, her counselor pulled her out and asked her, "Who do you think you are? Don't you know your classes don't lead to college?"

He told her that she and other Latino girls were good for two things: getting pregnant and having babies. "You just go around here parading and looking for someone to support you," he said.

The sad thing was that her counselor was Hispanic.

Her next counselor - Mr. Cooper - was a white, Ivy League graduate. He was the one who saved Consuelo from the destiny her prior counselor predicted.

"Do you know you're brilliant," Mr. Cooper told her. "You are just the innocent victim of a poor educational system. You can get anything you want in life. I believe in you. Will you not believe in you, too?"

And Mr. Cooper helped Consuelo get into college.

Once there, she joined the ROTC program. She thought it was a social club. But after overcoming the miles of running, the cliff rappelling, and the good ol' boy network, she began rising through the ranks of the military. Seven of her nine siblings also joined the military.

It reflected their father's commitment to "duty, honor and country." Ironically, by working 15 hours a day to support his large family, her father never learned English and never achieved his American citizenship. But he taught his children to be passionate about America.

Lt. Col. Kickbusch grew to become a successful role model for her community -- breaking barriers and setting records in the Army's combat support services. But it took her mother to help her realize what was really important in life.

"I had begun to assimilate," Consuelo says. "I wanted a condo. I wanted a German-made car. I wanted and I wanted."

The lieutenant colonel was just two years from becoming a general when her ailing mother came to visit.

"I'm coming because this is my last visit with you," her mother told the rising military star. "This is my dying wish. A real leader is a servant who creates the path for others."

"I learned from my mother that day -- the maid who cleaned other people's toilets and made them sparkle. I learned nothing is worth doing that does not stand the test of time," Consuelo said.

When she went to her superior to let him know she was leaving the military, he was shocked and curious as to why she would leave her fast-track military career.

"I'm going home to fight for children," she told him.

Acknowledged now as a charismatic, passionate and entertaining speaker, the retired lieutenant colonel has carried her powerful message to over a million parents, educators and community leaders.

She urges students to believe "we can all make our dreams come true, to not give up hope, but rather to take charge of your lives, make a real difference in your families and communities. Follow a disciplined road map to success."

And she challenged educators at the Promising Practices Conference to pursue "out-of-the-box thinking" in education. She said former migrant students should be good at that. "When you're poor, you don't even have a box, so you do a lot of thinking."

She told them to "make sure all children learn. No more excuses.

"Next time a child comes - whether he smells, has lice and his shoes are too big - that is America's child," Lt. Col. Kickbusch told educators.

Besides Lt. Col. Kickbusch, there were dozens of featured speakers and workshop presenters at the conference.

PhuongChi Nguyen, an OSPI migrant education program supervisor, discussed the importance of reading in scholastic and career success, and how native and ELL students can build their reading vocabulary.

Higher-paying jobs in our economy are more word-intensive, according to Ms. Nguyen. Low socio-economic laborers process with 616 words an hour; blue collar workers 1,251 words per hour; and professionals 2,153 words per hour.

Ms. Nguyen said there is a direct correlation between how much a person reads and the vocabulary they develop. Those whose vocabulary is in the top 10% read independently an average of over 20 minutes a day. Those whose vocabulary is in the bottom 20% read independently less than 1 minute a day on average.

"The implication is the more you read, the more you are exposed to new words and the greater will be your vocabulary," she said. "The more you read, the more you know. If you have a strong foundation, the more you understand and the larger your speaking and writing vocabulary."

To be prepared for college, a student typically develops a vocabulary of about 17,600 words - about 1,000 per year from birth. English language learners need to play catch-up.

However, Ms. Nguyen notes 98% of the words used in all texts - including university texts and technical texts - represent a vocabulary of only 4,800 words, approximately the number of words the typical college-bound student learns during four years of high school.

Teach the 4,800 most-used words, Ms. Nguyen recommends, "then teach strategies for discovering the meaning of the 123,200 low-frequency words. Don't waste time teaching the low-frequency words themselves."

During an awards banquet at the conference, numerous students and educators were honored for their outstanding efforts.

Ismael Vivanco, director of Migrant Education Regional Office (MERO) 171 in Wenatchee, honored three top educators around the state. They were Nadine Sims of Auburn School District, Jeanie Lochbaum of Centralia School District, and Karen Stevens of Kent School District.

Ms. Sims' nominator said, "Her room is a loving room, a caring room, and a whirlwind of activity," and her students' test scores show significant growth.

Ms. Stevens' nominator said she consistently "goes above and beyond the call of duty" by putting in long hours, collaborating with the community, and reorganizing her own school programs.

"I really enjoy what I do," Ms. Stevens said. "And I really believe in the individual child."

Lee Campos, president of the HACER foundation, announced 10 scholarships and tuition waivers. One of the recipients, Humberto Martinez of Sunnyside, now attends Heritage College, thanks to HACER. He represented all the scholarship winners as he spoke to the conference.

"When I came from Mexico at age 16, I came from a poor family. I suffered a lot from domestic violence in our home. And I didn't speak any English," Humberto said.

He lived with a relative he had never met before his arrival, and he missed loved ones he left behind in Mexico.

He put "every effort into school," but at times he was discouraged. A counselor inspired him. "Don't give up. I know you're smart," the counselor would say.

Humberto challenged students attending the conference. "No matter the situation you're in, you're going to break the barriers and succeed," he said.

He also challenged educators. "I hope you teachers will go back and find students like me and encourage them. Tell them, 'Never give up. There is a light ahead of you.'"

Dr. Richard Gomez, the state's migrant education director, had to follow Humberto to the lectern. He quipped, "I have a hunch a lot of people are going to follow him. He's going to make it a long ways."

Dr. Gomez also honored Sandra Pasiero-Davis for her many years of service as director of MERO 105. She recently resigned in order to become superintendent of Mabton School District.

Linda Roberts, director of the Secondary Education for Migrant Youth (SEMY) program, honored Toppenish senior Ladis Avila as the PASS distance learning student of the year. She also honored Kevin McKay of Zillah School District as the PASS Contact of the Year, for his efforts to help students succeed with their PASS courses.

Jennifer Whitney of the Washington Apple Education Foundation announced \$22,000 in student scholarships and school grants.

Thomas Romero, director of MERO 105 in Yakima, honored migrant students Mike Garduno of East Valley School District, Kiabet Patino of Moses Lake School District, and Jacqueline Rocha of Mount Vernon School District for their selection to attend last summer's Space Academy. Kiabet called the experience "the greatest experience ever."

Ms. Reyna notes that next year's Promising Practices Conference will be Oct. 13-15, 2006, at the Spokane Convention Center. It will include featured speaker Kay Toliver, an expert in math instruction.

Ms. Toliver is a Presidential, Disney and Kilby Award-winning teacher who has been teaching at East Harlem Tech/PS 72 in New York City for the past 30 years. She was the subject of a Peabody Award-winning PBS documentary, *Good Morning, Miss Toliver*, and is the host of the popular classroom television series, *The Eddie Files*, and its accompanying professional development series, *The Kay Toliver Files*.