

MONEY ISN'T ONLY SOURCE OF WEALTH, LATINA SAYS PROMINENT SPEAKER EXPLAINS VALUE OF FAMILY, EDUCATION



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BY MELANIE TURNER, BEE STAFF WRITER

Retired Army Lt. Col. Consuelo Castillo Kickbusch recalled the story Thursday of how her father helped her realize she was rich, though she lived in a "barrio."

Kickbusch, who left the barrio to become the highest-ranking Latina in the Army's combat support field ranks, is now a motivational speaker.

She addressed an audience of close to 300 -- mostly elementary school children and their parents -- at the 10th annual Cesar Chavez Celebration at California State University, Stanislaus.

Kickbusch works in ghettos and migrant camps to help people, like her, overcome poverty, discrimination and illiteracy. She encourages them not to give up hope, but to take charge of their lives.

Kickbusch, one of 10 children, grew up in Devil's Den, which she described as the most feared neighborhood in Laredo, Texas. It was a boxcar settlement -- where families lived in boxcars sitting in a wheat field. To make their boxcar more like a home, her father built a coal furnace and her mother put up curtains, she said.

When she was 12, her mother told her to take the bus uptown by herself. It would be her first trip to "middle class."

The bus crossed the railroad tracks, leaving dirt paths behind. For the first time, she saw paved streets, grass and two-story homes with windows that had all glass -- no aluminum foil.

"I started scratching my head. What are my parents doing wrong? For a while, I thought, 'Why do I belong to this family?'"

Sitting at a bus stop, she saw a woman wearing pearls and nail polish that matched her dress. Kickbusch wore shoes from Mexico that made a noise when she walked. "My father would always insist on two sizes bigger," she said.

The woman asked where she was from. She replied: "My name is Consuelo and I'm from the Devil's Den."

"You poor child. How sad," the woman said, clutching her purse and moving to the end of the bench.

At home, she told her father: "Guess what? We're poor."

"You didn't know it?" he asked.

Her father -- a man with three fingers missing and scars on his back, and who had never missed a day of work -- sat her down on a bench that he had made.

"He was telling me how I was to see myself the rest of my life," she said.

These were his words: "Listen to me today because tomorrow may be too late. Today you've known the difference about how human beings live. You're not poor. You're rich. You have a culture. ... You have traditions. I've taught you to be so rich in a faith in God."

He told her that as long as she did her best she would be richer than any rich person who takes opportunities for granted. "I believed him," Kickbusch said.

To the students gathered in Turlock, she said: "I hope that you never drop out of school. Because when you graduate is when you're free at last."

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