



Retired Army officer encourages students: At Kutztown University, a woman who grew up poor in Texas lets Latino teens from the Reading area know that they, too, can be successful in life.

Byline: Phoebe Sweet

Jan. 13--The barrio where retired Army Lt. Col. Consuelo Castillo Kickbusch grew up is halfway across the country from innercity Reading. But the emotional stories from her childhood in Texas that Kickbusch shared Thursday with 500 Latino high school students from the Reading area touched close to home. Students and teachers wept with Kickbusch, who went from a life of poverty with her immigrant parents to a 20-year career in the U.S. military, from which she retired as the highest-ranking Latina in the Combat Support Field of the U.S. Army.

Kickbusch spoke at Kutztown University as part of a daylong motivational and lifeplanning seminar for Latino high school students. KU and the U.S. Army sponsored the event. Kickbusch, 51, stressed the value of education and respect for parents. She warned about the costs of teen parenthood. She connected to the high school audience by speaking a mix of Spanish and English and making fun of herself as a young girl. But her lighthearted stories carried serious messages. After looking inside one student's wallet for what the audience presumed would be a condom, Kickbusch said she was actually looking for \$160,000. "Every 29 seconds there's a young girl in America under 15 getting pregnant," she said. "It takes \$160,000 to feed a baby from zero to 18. ... The reality of this world is that nine of 10 fathers under 18 never ever raise their children." Since retiring in 1996 and becoming a motivational speaker, Kickbusch has met self-professed gang members, teenage mothers and orphans. "I could have stayed in the Army, but I believe in you," said Kickbusch. "I get very angry when I hear them say, 'Latinos, they're dumb. Look at their SAT scores.'

"I say, 'Teach them.' " She told stories of her childhood in a barrio in Laredo, Texas, where she lived in a two-bedroom home with her parents and nine brothers and sisters. Her motivation for college, she said, came when her father tried to buy a washing machine for her mother with coins he had saved in a coffee can. When the saleswoman told him he didn't have enough money for the gift, he cried outside the store and told Kickbusch his dream was for her to go to school.

She told the students that they, too, should hold onto their dreams and pursue a college education.

Copyright (c) 2006, Reading Eagle, Pa.

Distributed by Knight Ridder/Tribune Business News.

For information on republishing this content, contact us at (800) 661-2511 (U.S.), (213) 237-4914 (worldwide), fax (213) 237-6515, or e-mail reprints@krtinfo.com.
