

Lessons of Humanity

Local 3rd grade bilingual teacher wins Golden Apple Award



María Eugenia Hernández, a 3rd grade bilingual teacher at Irma C. Ruiz Elementary School was among the 10 teachers to win a Golden Apple Award in all of Illinois this year. Hernández encourages her students to achieve all their dreams.

María Eugenia Hernández's lesson plans are often an intersection between the textbooks and the life outside the windows of her classroom in Pilsen's Southwest Side. This year, Hernández, a 3rd grade bilingual teacher at Irma C. Ruiz Elementary School was named one of 10 Golden Apple Fellows, granting her lifetime membership to the Golden Apple Academy of Educators. Only one out of every 10,000 teachers in the area can claim this distinction.

According to Dominc Belmonte, president and CEO of the Golden Apple Foundation, it was Hernández's undying belief that her students can achieve anything despite their supposed limitations that got her this award.

"She believes in her students to a degree that is impressive. During the evaluation process, she brought 3rd grade students, dressed in lab coats and stethoscopes around their neck, [to speak] as experts in different parts of the body. This is going above and beyond the power of teaching and implanting dreams in these young students," Belmonte said.

Hernández, originally from Guadalajara, Jalisco, relocated to the North Side of Chicago with her family at age 9. Having grown up and graduated from the Chicago Public School (CPS) system, Hernández feels comfortable speaking to her students from experience.

"I always tell my students to be honest with themselves above all or else they will be setting goals for someone else," Hernández said. "My students can't leave the classroom without knowing that they are worth learning and setting a goal, they need to learn to be advocates for themselves."

While CPS is facing many serious challenges, the bureaucracy and lack of resources does not discourage Hernández.

"Its challenging to work in CPS with all the financial hardships that we are dealing with; you are asked as a teacher to really look in depth at how you teach with the resources we have," Hernández said.

According to a recent report, The Schools Teachers Leave, released by the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago, about 100 Chicago schools lose more than a quarter of their staff every year.

Hernández did not go to college immediately after graduating from Lane Tech High School. Instead, she began to work to raise her family. She decided to go back to school after a period of readjustment following her divorce. Inspired by the great teachers her two sons had, she decided to pursue education. In 2004, she earned a bachelors degree from the University of Illinois. After student teaching at Ruiz, she was hired as an 8th grade Math and Language Arts teacher.

Rubén Cortéz, 18, was one of Hernández's first students. Despite having moved around the country since his years at Ruiz, he likes to stay in touch with Hernández.

"Ms. Hernández got to us on a more personal level. She knew when it was time to be a teacher and when it was time to be our friend," Cortez said.

Hernández allows her students to express their fears and anxieties inside the classroom. At the same time, she is open about her own mistakes and feelings.

"We have to show these kids that their ideas matter. If a child does not believe you care, they won't open up and care about what you are trying to teach them. They can take all the academic tests, but it does not become part of their life – it's when you too open up to them that the exchange becomes valuable," Hernández said.

Ana Medina, 18, also a former student says it was Hernández's candid attitude that made all the difference.

"She never hid her feelings from us. If she was having a bad day, she would let us know and she was never afraid to admit when she didn't know something," Medina added.

Getting students to focus while dealing with outside pressures can be a challenge; Hernández's approach is to balance the lesson plans with the necessary humanity and comfort of the family she creates inside her classroom.

"Sometimes the teaching needs to stop. Sometimes you need to stop and care for the child first and the academic will come later," she said. "It's not that education doesn't come first, but you need to take care of the wounds, the ones you can see and the ones we can't, on those days you teach life."

Hernández's nominator for the Golden Apple award has remained anonymous. She thanks whoever took the time to submit her name and acknowledge her work. As part of the Golden Apple Fellowship, Hernández will receive a new lap- top computer, \$3,000 and a sabbatical at

Northwestern University next spring semester. Her list of possible courses includes women's studies, Latino studies and photography.

Every month, Golden Apple Fellows like Hernández share their best resources for teachers and classrooms, all available for free download at [@link href='http://www.goldenapple.org'>goldenapple.org](http://www.goldenapple.org).

by Adriana Gallardo
Adriana.Gallardo@extranews.net