



American dreamer: Boost from Avance leads immigrant to inspire kids

By Ramón Rentería / El Paso Times

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Teacher Lourdes Rivera instructed Luis Daniel Gallegos at the RFK Pre-K Center. (Victor Calzada / El Paso Times)

EL PASO -- Lourdes Rivera tells preschool children to hang all their self-doubts on a tree outside her classroom.

"Here, everything is possible," Rivera said. "Children know that the phrase, 'I can't,' is unacceptable, not allowed in this classroom."

Rivera, 44, is well-qualified to teach and preach that the American dream is attainable with education.

Just 13 years ago, Rivera was a Mexican

immigrant newly settled in El Paso, without English skills, but with a huge desire to learn.

In 1997, she enrolled with her 2-year-old son in parenting education classes offered through Avance, a nonprofit organization that helps immigrant children and families break the cycle of poverty with early childhood development, parenting skills, adult



Lourdes Rivera recently used a hand puppet to teach her students about letters at the RFK Pre-K Center. (Photos by Victor Calzada / El Paso Times)

literacy and healthy marriages.

The stark reality: El Paso is the fourth-poorest city in the United States. Most government estimates suggest 45 percent of the more than 70,000 children under age 5 grow up poor.

Rivera, the mother of three sons, learned English, obtained her GED, earned credentials in child development, picked up an associate's degree at El Paso Community College and

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became a lead teacher in Avance's preschool program. She bought into the American dream in just a little over a decade.

To put a bit more icing on the cake, Rivera plans to enroll next fall at the University of Texas at El Paso, where she wants to pursue a bachelor's degree in bilingual education.

"It will cost us effort, but we all can accomplish something," Rivera said.

Rivera is often applauded for giving children and their parents the confidence to do better in life.

"She's a person who has an enormous desire to learn and get ahead," said Yvonne Zimmer, a mentor in the Ysleta Independent School District's Texas Early Education Model program.

"She's an excellent role model, always tries to do all that is best for the children and always looking for ways to help the community."

Rivera grew up in a small town south of Chihuahua.

She wanted to teach but married young, started a family and never finished school. Her husband, Rumaldo, is a landscaper.



Teacher Lourdes Rivera instructed Jacqueline Jaramillo on the correct color to use on a drawing of a heart at the RFK Pre-K Center. (Victor Calzada / El Paso Times)

In El Paso, the family moved out of public housing and bought a house in Agua Dulce near Horizon City. Rivera also supports her aging parents in Mexico.

Rivera's quest for knowledge rubbed off on her children. Her oldest son, Ramon, 27, graduated from Texas A&M University and now works as a computer engineer in Dallas. Ricardo, 19, is studying mechanical engineering at the University of Texas at El Paso. Victor, 12, is a student leader in the gifted and talented program at Horizon Middle School.

Rivera tells her sons she'll be next in the family with a university degree.

"The best inheritance we can give our children is not wealth," Rivera said. "It's an education."

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Parents like Ana Lozano, who has children in the Avance preschool program, applaud Rivera for helping their children and motivating mothers.

"Lourdes is very understanding, the type of person who injects you with the desire to get ahead," Lozano said.

Claudia Rivera (no relation), another mother with a 4-year-old son in Rivera's classroom, has noticed her son already trying to read.

"Lourdes has helped me immensely," she said. "It's almost as if she fell from heaven. I'm surprised with what my son learns daily."

Margarita Sanchez oversees Avance's child development program at nine sites across El Paso.

"Lourdes came into our parenting program with her small child. From there, she acquired a thirst for education," Sanchez said. "I see first-hand how much the program helps Hispanics."

Sanjay Mathur, executive director of Avance, suggests Rivera is just one of many success stories.

"We're successfully integrating immigrants, breaking the cycle of poverty in one generation," Mathur said. "The more we educate women like Lourdes, the more advantageous a society is for everybody."

Rivera's unpolished English still makes her a bit insecure, sometimes.

"Someday, I will overcome that, too," she said. "For me, the payoff is not my salary but the satisfaction of seeing children learn and get ahead."

Ramón Rentería may be reached at rrenteria@elpasotimes.com; 546-6146.

Rivera's journey

1997: Enrolls in Avance's parenting program with her young son.

1999: Starts learning English at El Paso Community College.

2001: Starts working at Avance; family moves out of public housing into its own home.

2002: Completes English as a Second Language classes.

2003: Obtains her GED; receives her accreditation in child development.

2006: Promoted to lead teacher with Avance.

2007: Receives associate's degree in child development from El Paso Community College.

2008: Texas Early Education Model certifies her classroom as "School-Ready" after three years.

2009: Prepares to pursue a bilingual education teaching degree at UTEP.

Source: Avance.

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