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12-12-2010

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Recommended Citation

Roger Williams University School of Law, "Newsroom: RWU Law Student Promotes Latino Education" (2010). *Life of the Law School (1993-)*. 113.
https://docs.rwu.edu/law_archives_life/113

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Newsroom

RWU Law Student Promotes Latino Education

RWU Law student Delia Rodriguez organizes the first-ever Latino College Access Conference, urging Rhode Island Latinos to seek higher education.

From the Providence Sunday Journal: "[Latino students in R.I. urged to prepare for college](#)" by Gina Macris, Journal Staff Writer.

PROVIDENCE, December 12, 2010 — Celita K. Vargas was 9 years old when her parents brought her to the United States from her native Guatemala — too young to fully understand the implications of her status as an illegal immigrant.

But the little girl who loved math knew she always wanted to go to college. Ten years after graduating from Mount Pleasant High School, she got a bachelor's degree from the University of Rhode Island.

Today Vargas, 32, is a United States citizen who works as a civil and environmental engineer for Commonwealth Engineers & Consultants, where she designs bridges.

On Saturday, Vargas took time out to talk one-on-one with Latino youth who face their own obstacles to college access. She was one of several mentors at the first-ever Latino College Access Conference, held at the Community College of Rhode Island at 1 Hilton St.

The keynote speaker was Andres Idarraga, a former drug dealer who went from the Adult Correctional Institutions to Brown University and to Yale Law School over the course of 10 years.

When Yale accepted him in 2008, his story attracted national media coverage.

Idarraga, 32, has gone on to distinguish himself as a student at Yale, where he is now in the third year of law school.

He told some 150 aspiring college students to think about what they're doing every minute of every day so that they are in control of defining their lives. Otherwise, he said, they will be defined by others.

About 40 percent of success can be traced to "soft skills," such as persistence, Idarraga said.

Today Idarraga moves in circles where law school graduates can get starting jobs that pay well into the six figures.

But for many young people who do not grow up in environments where college education is the norm, “education is an abstraction,” he said.

“We don’t know what the rewards are,” he said.

He encouraged his audience to seek out role models and “don’t be discouraged by setbacks.”

“Setbacks make you a better person,” Idarraga said.

From prison, he applied to the University of Rhode Island. He used his acceptance letter from URI as leverage to win parole. And after one semester at URI, he had gained an influential ally who supported him in his application to transfer to Brown.

When Vargas, the engineer, completed Mount Pleasant High School in 1997, she could not qualify for financial aid to attend college because she had no legal status.

Instead, she worked full-time and paid out-of-pocket, one course at a time, to attend the Community College of Rhode Island.

Then in 2000, she received permanent resident status as part of an amnesty program for illegal immigrants. Vargas was sworn in as a citizen in 2004, and in 2007 received her bachelor’s degree in civil and environmental engineering, cum laude.



College access for Latinos is particularly important for the Rhode Island economy, according to **Delia Rodriguez, the chief organizer of the event**. A 2005 study showed that Latinos make up the fastest-growing segment of the population in Rhode Island but are the least educated. And Rhode Island’s Latinos remain at the bottom when compared with the education levels of Latinos in other states, Rodriguez said.

Rodriguez’s own journey toward a bachelor’s degree lasted 17 years.

She is now a student at Roger Williams University Law School and works as the bilingual program coordinator for the College Planning Centers of Rhode Island, a program of the Rhode Island Student Loan Authority.

For full story click [here](#).