Women of Influence: Dawn Martinez Oropeza

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Dawn Martinez Oropeza brings energy, passion and a creative drive to her work assisting Iowa Latino youth to Dream. Learn. Succeed. As the first Executive Director of Al Exito, she’s helped move the volunteer-established project to mentor 8th grade Latinas educational success in one school district to now include middle and high school girls and boys programming in 10 Iowa districts. Parents programming has been added to encourage their support of high school graduation and post-secondary education.

Dawn believes expertise within the Latino community adds value to the message of educational success. When Latino college students, who have overcome family objections or lack of financial resources to obtain their dream of education, share their stories with students and parents, an impact is made. At the conclusion of one session, a father cried as he stated he now understood why he must let his daughter go to college.

As students dream of careers, Latino professionals share their pathways to success in round-robin interviews by students. The students prepare by learning to shake hands, have eye contact, and taking notes. Parents learn more about navigating the American academic system and planning for college expenses.

Dawn creates opportunities to partner with colleges and other institutions. Led by university faculty, Al Exito Movimiento (high school) students have studied Latino educational achievement statistics, the ICE raid in Postville, and the ramification for their lives and communities. In partnership with 4H, the students participated in cultural heritage activities and embraced its richness at Camp Maize. Every student in the Al Exito program has opportunity each year for college campus visits which includes conversations with Latino students. Dawn says, for many, the Al Exito trip is the first time they’ve set foot on a college campus.

Al Exito students not only learn but are successful in sharing what they’ve learned about themselves and their culture. Dawn arranged for them to present to (300) Iowa State University students in pre-education majors, in workshops at the Iowa Latino Conference, and in radio interviews. She utilized the political focus on Iowa this year so students could observe presidential candidates and ensure the Latino youth voice was heard.

Dawn is passionate about the success of Iowa Latino youth and their families. She and the organization value educational achievement as a key component for a better future. As a result, Dawn and Al Exito utilize professional program evaluation to substantiate progress and to tailor programming.

 Dawn has a deep and broad network in the Latino community; mentors youth and young professionals; and is an artist and educator who generously shares her knowledge and time locally and nationally. She not only is impacting the lives of Latinos, she is influencing all Iowans to be welcoming.

I heartily recommend Dawn Martinez Oropeza as a 2016 Woman of Influence.

Diane B. Patton, Al Exito Board of Directors President

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