Ruby Herrera

3707 Carpenter Ave.

Des Moines, Iowa 50311

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To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing to support the nomination of Dawn Oropeza-Martinez for Business Record’s Women of Influence award. It’s my great honor and privilege to recommend such an outstanding community leader and dear friend. This award will recognize Dawn’s tireless effort in brining awareness to higher education opportunities for Latino students in Iowa.

As a Des Moines Public School teacher and advocate of closing the achievement gap among Latinos students, I have found it vital to count on mentorship programs like Al Exito. But only after Dawn was hired as Al Exito’s Executive Director did the mentorship program take on the shape of success. Dawn’s vision and passion for making a difference in the lives of many Latino youth is what has kept her committed. She has been very devoted to creating a culturally competent and engaging curriculum for the program. But most importantly, at the end of the day there’s a group of Latino students that for the first time in their lives have felt acknowledged and affirmed as learners.

What is more, she has researched and applied for grants that would also guarantee programs like Juntos: Together for a Better Future through Iowa State University Extension so that Latino parents, along with their children, can be informed adequately in Spanish about how to get into college. The desire of achieving higher education has always been there for Latino parents but now, Dawn assists in making sure that path is clearer and more tangible. Thanks to Dawns influence there are parents that have changed their views about allowing their young daughters to go off to college far away from home where as before that was a barrier within the cultural standards. Her position in the community is highly respected and thus, parents look to her for advice and guidance. Students turn to her for wisdom and love. She genuinely cares so much that they see her as a second mom.

In the past ten years that I’ve known Dawn she has shared her art and time to reviving buildings with colorful Mexican murals, painting, and thanking mother-nature to the beat of a drum that invites all to some Aztec folkloric dancing! It’s wonderful to see how the youth love learning about their ancestors and the fact that Dawn is helping them preserve such a legacy of our culture. Dawn has facilitated many workshops, summer programs, and has given lectures about the significance of preserving the essence of what makes the Mexican culture so valuable to this country.

Time after time, her commitment to the community has motivated others to not only ponder the idea of given back to their community but to take action! One voice matters but many make a powerful difference. In fact, Al Exito has now branched out to the high school level with a program called Movimiento in which students take on more social justice projects. In the past year, Dawn has mentored Latino high school students from Movimiento to have a voice and not hold back. The purpose of these social justice projects is for the betterment and deeper understanding of the Latino community. These talented students are currently bringing their powerful message of social justice to other neighboring high schools and various college campuses. They are not longer shy to speak their truth. They stand strong and ready to pursue higher dreams thanks to the support of Dawn.

In conclusion, Dawn influences us to take the first step into leadership roles by setting the example and high expectations. And everyone that has met her, young and old, knows that she opens up her heart and home to make them feel like ***familia.*** She is there along the way to make sure that if we stumble, we get back up with ***ganas….***with the desire to keep moving forward.

Dawn is a superb candidate for this award because she carries with her the gift of compassion and determination. It’s her passion, positive energy, humble heart, and leadership style that make her reliable and relatable. I hope to one day carry on the legacy and example that she has set for us to continue.

Sincerely,

Ruby Herrera, MAT

Spanish Language Acquisition Teacher

May Goodrell Middle School, IB

*P.S Wrote by me but inspired by the many stories that the following students, mentees and friends have shared with me: Mercedes Castillo, Ana Delgado, Carlos Celaya, Jennie Alvarado and Ana Lilia Soto. Gracias!/Thanks!*