



Loretta Perna: an outstanding educator supporting Latinx students in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania

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Abstract: The support and mentorship that the Kennett High school students receive in the “Walk In kNowledge” and “Hermanitas” programs, and from the coordinator of these programs, Ms. Loretta Perna, is invaluable to the Kennett Square community in Pennsylvania, United States. Students receive guidance from a person who believes in them, challenges them to reach higher, plus provides them with the necessary tools to succeed throughout their high school and college years, as well as in their professional lives. The support students receive include assistance throughout the entire college application process, exposure to college life and career options through campus tours, academic summer camp, internship programs, plus, connections with additional mentors, and opportunities to expand on their skills

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base. Five current and former students share their stories and the impact Loretta has had on their academic and personal success and how her support changed the trajectory of their lives. Guadalupe, Sonia, Estefani, Marlen, and Angel demonstrate how Loretta believes in her students, encourages them to reach higher, and supports them throughout their journey, often surpassing expectations to meet her students' needs. Students then gain other experiences they would otherwise not have had the opportunity to experience.

Keywords: Mentorship, support, Kennett Square, immigrant, Latinx students

Resumen: La asesoría y apoyo que los estudiantes de la preparatoria de Kennett Square reciben por parte del programa “Walk In kNowledge” y “Hermanitas” y por parte de su coordinadora, Loretta Perna es de un valor incalculable para la comunidad de Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, Estados Unidos. Los estudiantes reciben asesoría de una persona que cree en ellos, los lleva a alcanzar grandes metas y les provee de las herramientas necesarias para que tengan éxito a través de su estancia en la preparatoria, en la universidad y como profesionistas en los Estados Unidos. El apoyo que los estudiantes reciben incluye asesoría durante el proceso de ingreso a la universidad, el familiarizarse con las distintas carreras a través de visitas a las universidades, participación en programas académicos, el ayudarles a relacionarse con otros mentores así como apoyarlos para mejorar sus habilidades para la vida. Cinco estudiantes tanto egresados como aquellos que aún cursan la preparatoria de Kennett Square comparten sus historias y el cómo Loretta ha mejorado sus vidas tanto en el plano del éxito académico como el personal. Guadalupe, Sonia, Estefani, Marlene y Angel demuestran como Loretta cree en sus estudiantes, los anima a llegar más lejos y los apoya en sus trayectorias casi siempre superando las expectativas esperadas, todo para atender las necesidades de sus estudiantes. Los estudiantes entonces viven experiencias que de otra manera no hubieran tenido la oportunidad de tener.

Palabras clave: orientación y apoyo académico, Kennett Square, migración, estudiantes Latinxs

Résumé : Les conseils et le soutien que les élèves du Kennett Square High School reçoivent du programme “Walk In kNowledge” et “Little Sisters” et de leur coordinatrice, Loretta Perna, sont inestimables pour la communauté de Kennett Square, en Pennsylvanie. États Unis. Les étudiants reçoivent le mentorat d'une personne qui croit en eux, les amène à atteindre de grands objectifs et leur fournit les outils nécessaires pour réussir tout au long de leur séjour au lycée, à l'université et en tant que professionnels aux États-Unis. Le soutien que reçoivent les étudiants comprend un encadrement pendant le processus d'admission au collège, se familiariser avec les différentes carrières grâce à des visites au collège, la participation à des programmes académiques, les aider à se connecter avec d'autres mentors et les aider à améliorer leurs compétences pour la vie. Cinq diplômés et étudiants de Kennett Square High School partagent leurs histoires et comment Loretta a amélioré leur vie en réussissant à la fois scolaire et personnel. Guadalupe, Sonia, Estefani, Marlene et Angel montrent comment Loretta croit en ses élèves, les encourage à aller plus loin et les accompagne dans leurs trajectoires, dépassant presque toujours les attentes attendues, le tout pour répondre aux besoins de leurs élèves. Les étudiants vivent alors des expériences qu'ils n'auraient pas eu l'occasion de vivre autrement.

Mots clés : mentorat, Kennett Square, immigration, étudiants Latinos

Resumo: O conselho e o apoio que os alunos da Kennett Square High School recebem dos programas “Walk In kNowledge” e “Little Sisters” e de sua coordenadora, Loretta Perna, são inestimáveis para a comunidade de Kennett Square, Pensilvânia, Estados Unidos. Os alunos recebem orientação de uma pessoa que acredita neles, que os leva a alcançar grandes objetivos e lhes fornece as ferramentas necessárias para serem bem-sucedidos, ao longo do ensino médio, faculdade e como profissionais nos Estados Unidos. O apoio que os alunos recebem inclui treinamento durante o processo de admissão à ensino superior familiarização com as várias carreiras por meio de visitas à faculdade, participação em programas acadêmicos, ajudando-os a se conectar com outros mentores, bem como apoiá-los para melhorar suas habilidades para a vida. Cinco graduados e alunos da Kennett Square High School compartilham suas histórias de como Loretta melhorou suas vidas em termos de sucesso acadêmico e pessoal. Guadalupe, Sonia, Estefani, Marlene e Angel mostram como Loretta acredita em seus alunos, incentiva-os a irem mais longe e os apoia em suas trajetórias, quase sempre superando as expectativas tudo para atender às necessidades de seus alunos. Os alunos, por sua vez, têm experiências que, de outra forma, não haveria oportunidade de tê-las.

Palavras chave: mentoria, apoio, Kennett Square, imigrante, alunos latinx

Introduction

One exemplary mentor and two programs have had an immense impact on the Latinx community in the suburban town of Kennett Square in Southeastern Pennsylvania. Loretta Perna, coordinator of the Walk In kNowledge (WIN) and Hermanitas Program, has worked for the Latinx community in Kennett Square for over two decades. She has mentored hundreds of Kennett High School (KHS) students, most of whom are Mexican immigrants or first-generation Mexican-American. Loretta's work and support have led to an increase in Latinx high school graduates and college attendees and graduates. Loretta began working with the Latinx community in 1998 as a Student Support Specialist for the Migrant Education Program, a program designed to provide children of migrant agricultural workers with educational and support services to offset the challenges associated with a migratory life and help them succeed in school.

In 2002, Loretta became a board member of MANA (a National Latina Organization) de Chester County and the high school coordinator of the Hermanitas program (the Hermanitas program is the mentoring component of MANA). The Hermanitas is a national mentorship program designed to provide middle and high school Latina students with opportunities to pursue higher education and expand their personal and professional skills through mentorship, leadership development, community service, and advocacy. The Hermanitas work with Loretta and with one another to improve their grade point average, acquire problem-solving and time management skills, experience giving back to their community through volunteerism and learn about the importance of eating healthy foods and exercising. In addition, students enrolled in the acting workshop develop confidence in public speaking, increase their interest in reading, strengthen their listening and delivery of speeches; plus, expand their imagination and critical thinking skills. Each year, the number of program members increases. During the 2019-2020 school year, over 50 students participated in the program, many of whom are also students participating in the Walk In kNowledge program.

Loretta has been the coordinator of the Walk In kNowledge program since its founding in 2007. The mission of the program is to provide students with academic support including homework assistance, mentorship, options for post-secondary education, assistance with acculturation, and delivery of information regarding the school system in the United States to the parents. Walk In kNowledge students receive assistance with classwork, transportation from program activities, access to computers and workspaces, opportunities for community service and academic summer camp programs, and internships, plus college preparatory activities and scholarships ("Kennett's WIN program inspires students to succeed," 2015). In the first two years of the program, participation was limited to Latinx students, but after a grant expired in 2010, the program opened to all students. Each year the program serves over 150 students. During the 2019-2020 school year, the program served 163 students.

The impact of Loretta's work and the Walk In kNowledge and Hermanitas Programs has on Kennett High School students is displayed in the stories of five of her students. Guadalupe, Sonia, Estefani, Marlen, and Angel write how their lives were shaped by Loretta's mentorship and their attendance in these programs. Their stories demonstrate how Loretta's work fulfills the need the Latinx community has for support as many families and students are unaware that higher education is possible for them or they do not know how to navigate the college application process and prepare for academic life at the university level. These stories also exhibit how the assistance students received provided them with the opportunity to

gain knowledge and experiences necessary to succeed in college and as professionals, skills they would have otherwise not had the opportunity to acquire.

Students' Stories

Guadalupe Ortiz Cortez

My name is Guadalupe Ortiz Cortez. I was born and raised in a rural community in Guanajuato, Mexico. My family immigrated to Pennsylvania when I was nine years old. I am a 2013 Kennett High School graduate. At KHS, I joined the Walk In kNowledge Program and began working with Ms. Loretta Perna. She was my first mentor. It was not until I met her that I began envisioning a bigger purpose and setting larger goals for myself. Working with her helped me go on to pursue a Bachelor's degree in Regional Planning from the Cook Honors College at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania and a Master's in Urban and Environmental Planning at Arizona State University. Currently, I am a city planner for a city in Arizona.

I am very proud of my journey because I never imagined I could pursue a career and achieve the personal independence I have today. The success I have achieved is due to the exceptional mentorship I received from Ms. Perna. She is welcoming, altruistic, attentive, sincere, reliable, and honorable. Ms. Perna has made a difference in my life and the lives of many immigrant and first-generation students in Chester County, Pennsylvania. I believe if more students had mentors like Ms. Perna, we would have more young adults rise to their full potential and become exemplary students and professionals.

The knowledge Ms. Perna shared with me and her eagerness to help me had a significant impact on my life. She taught me the value of time and hard work. I learned how to create long-term goals and an action plan to achieve them. She helped me embrace my accent as we practiced reading aloud in front of classmates. Also, I learned how to greet a person with a firm handshake and the value of community service and participation. Each year, we volunteered with the local Rotary Club to clean up nearby roads, and we distributed water and fruit at the annual Kennett Run. It is due to the values that she instilled in me that today, I continue to seek opportunities to help my community.

As part of her work to help us expand our possibilities and skills base, Ms. Perna organized numerous college tours and presented us with opportunities to participate in college-sponsored programs. As a high school student, I was able to attend an engineering program at the Pennsylvania State University and intern with Exelon Generation, an electric power company. In addition, Ms. Perna also coordinates the Hermanitas Program; through this program, I gained organizational, networking, and leadership skills.

Moreover, Ms. Perna would periodically invite her former students to share their experiences and advice on their transition into college, choosing careers, and applying to scholarships. These types of workshops were very motivating and helped me to believe that I too could make the transition from high school to college. Ms. Perna ensured we excelled in our high school courses and supported us through the college application process. She connected us to professors that tutored us, and she secured funding for the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) courses that prepared us for the college entrance exam. With her assistance, I completed college and scholarship applications. My writing skills are not one of my strong suits, and to support me, Ms. Perna took the time out of her busy schedule to review my college and

scholarship essays and provide me with feedback. Working with her on my essays helped me improve my writing skills and played a significant role in me receiving acceptance letters from all the universities and scholarship funds I applied to. With hard work and perseverance, I was able to graduate from college debt-free.

As any great mentor, Ms. Perna listened to my concerns and aspirations and was willing to find outside support if I needed it. Once, I expressed my desire to learn how to play golf. She saw my excitement as I spoke about the sport and connected me with Mr. Larry Strawley, who became my golf coach and mentor. Mr. Strawley gave me golf lessons every weekend until I left for college. I had the opportunity to attend Professional Golfers' Association (PGA) and Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) golf tournaments and even volunteered as a marshal at the 9th hole at a ShopRite LPGA Classic tournament in Galloway, New Jersey. Thanks to Ms. Perna, I gained another mentor who taught me significant life skills and how to play a sport that I enjoy and use today as a networking tool.

In the beginning, when I welcomed Ms. Perna's mentorship, I did not realize how much I needed it. She opened my eyes to the potential I had within me to succeed beyond high school and the different possibilities available for me. She provided me with the necessary tools to become not only a successful student but also a professional in my chosen career. Together with other students, I learned the skills needed to become a successful and contributing member of my community and a citizen of the United States.

Ms. Perna and I remained in touch after my high school graduation. She continued to provide me with mentorship as I transitioned into college, graduate school, and my career. She has supported me through my young adult life. Knowing I had Ms. Perna on my side, just a message or phone call away, provided me with comfort as I moved alone across the country to attend graduate school and start my first professional job. I know I will be able to call Ms. Perna a mentor and a friend for the rest of my life. She helped me gain experiences and skills I wouldn't have been able to attain without her support. I can say with assurance that I would not be where I am today without her. Ms. Perna taught me to believe in myself, listen to my instincts, and follow my dreams. My parents and I are grateful for her guidance and help to foster and strengthen my personal and professional capacity as we maneuvered in an unknown country and a new way of life.

The impact mentorship can have on an individual is invaluable. I learned this as I witnessed Ms. Perna's unparalleled mentorship help her students achieve their goals and become successful professionals. Since I met Ms. Perna, I gained many mentors along the way, and I became a mentor myself. During my undergraduate career, I was a mentor to two young women as they transitioned into college life away from home. As a professional city planner, I plan to continue paying it forward by mentoring minority college students interested in city planning. I want to be an agent for change and pass on the support and resources that I obtained from Ms. Loretta Perna, a remarkable mentor.

Sonia Castano-García.

I am just *one* Mexican student from a small rural town south of Mexico City, whose life Loretta Perna has touched. My background story is unique, but the impact Loretta has had on my life is shared with countless others. It is important to share my story – the story of migrating from Mexico to the US, the story of my parents' sacrifices through the years, the story of my mother's struggle to sustain our family, the story of my father's early passing, and the story of how I have overcome each

circumstance before me. Intertwined within my story, are the tremendous impacts that Loretta's efforts have had on my life, and only then can you begin to understand the importance of educators and mentors as passionate as Ms. Perna.

I will dive into how my first internship ignited a fire of career goals. I will talk about the way acting classes, community service, field trips, and mentoring opened up my mind and filled me with the confidence to conquer the endless opportunities at my disposal. I will share how I ultimately ended up pursuing higher education at Robert Morris University, and more importantly, how I navigated the financial burden attached to that education. Ultimately, I will arrive at where I am today and the career path ahead of me. All of these experiences were made possible through Loretta Perna and the academic support programs she has constructed through the years.

About two and a half hours south of Mexico City in the State of Mexico, Mexico, there is a small township by the name of *Almoloya de Alquisiras*. From there, another few kilometers down a long dirt road is the place where I was born and raised for the first six years of my life. *Los Ranchos*, is a very small, impoverished, rural area that was hard to locate on a map until a few years ago. Though I do not remember much, I know that life in Mexico was not easy and that my family struggled to make ends meet. What I do remember is that my father worked and lived in the United States for the majority of the time, while only visiting us about two times per year. The plan was always to save enough money so that my mother, my two sisters, and I could move to the US with him. My father was convinced that this is where we could grow up to make something of ourselves. In early 2000, we made that move and I became a young immigrant student now living in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania.

Fast forward about eight years, I first met Loretta Perna the summer before my freshman year of high school. At the time, I knew two things: that I wanted to pursue a college degree after high school and that Loretta was dedicated to helping Latinx students within our community (my older sister included) achieve goals similar to mine. During that summer, Loretta had just obtained funding for the Walk in kNowledge Program (WIN). I became one of the first students to be a part of this new mentorship program that was aimed at providing students with the opportunities, resources, and skills that we would not otherwise obtain, but are imperative on the pathway to success. Through WIN, Loretta offered countless coaching opportunities to help build our personal brand, provide us with the confidence to speak up, and most importantly, learn how to turn our dreams into actionable goals.

To help build our personal brand, Loretta established grade requirements for our school courses and set up after-school tutoring and mentoring programs to help us reach those. She also established requirements for how we carried ourselves, always reminding us to just pay attention as we went through life and to say things like "*May I*" and "*Yes, please*". This, of course, may seem so trivial, but in a community like ours, no one else was teaching us the importance of first impressions and the way others perceived us. Even now, as I continue to build my personal brand, I am often taken back to the little lessons Loretta taught me.

To provide us with confidence, Loretta aimed at teaching us to not be afraid to speak up. She would make us speak in front of our peers while keeping tabs of areas for improvement for each of us. Further, when Ms. Perna realized we needed even more help than anticipated, she set up acting classes, forcing us to step even further outside of our comfort zone. Once again, in our community, no one else was really forcing us to speak up. Outside of Ms. Perna's classroom, I would often go through my day without ever raising my hand in class, even if something was not making

sense. It took years of coaching for me to build the confidence that later helped me navigate college and the start of my career.

Lastly, Loretta taught us how to turn our dreams into actionable goals by committing herself to provide us with the opportunities that we needed. I specifically remember a time in which Loretta worked with her community network to create an internship opportunity for a group of us at Exelon Generation. For one summer during high school, I spent eight weeks at Exelon learning about the business, shadowing various departments, and networking with various professionals. At the time, a corporate career seemed like such a foreign concept, but it was this very internship that sparked my interest and opened my mind to someday being a professional myself. Beyond the internship, Loretta also organized college visits, community service opportunities, conferences, and so much more which allowed me to move forward on the path of my goal at the time of pursuing a college degree.

The impact that Ms. Perna has had on my life is immense and has gone beyond myself, becoming important for my parents as well. While my mother and father played an imperative role in pushing me towards higher education and being a support system, they simply lacked the skills and resources to offer much more beyond that. My mother had the education of a 5th grader. Though she loved school, my grandparents thought it was useless and made her drop out to instead help around the farm, learn how to cook and clean, and hope for a marriage that would sustain her. In a similar fashion, my father at just eight years old was forced to drop out of second grade to begin working in Mexico and sustain his eleven younger siblings. After nearly a decade of hard work in Mexico, he brought himself to the US and continued to work hard his entire life. By the age of 45, my father fell ill with pancreatic cancer and passed away only two years after being diagnosed. And, during this period of time, my family as a whole had already been in shambles. My mother often struggling to sustain us on her own even while working multiple jobs.

As I embarked on my journey to Robert Morris University, my mother could only afford to offer a roof over my head and food when I came home to visit, while my father had just passed two months prior. A piece of me felt selfish taking off and worried beyond belief at the financial burden before me. During these challenging times, Loretta pushed me to tell my story – making me reach out to the Financial Aid office at Robert Morris University once again to ask for help in covering at least my first year. The goal then was that once I got in there, I would work hard to help secure each year as it came. If I had not done that, I do not know where I would be today.

I successfully graduated from Robert Morris University in May 2016 with a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration, with a concentration in Accounting and a minor in Legal Studies. Throughout college, I interned with two “Big 4” accounting firms, PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) and Deloitte & Touche. I received a full-time offer with Deloitte in Philadelphia the summer before my senior year of college and that is where my career in external audit ultimately began. Today, I work in an internal audit with a large manufacturing company that owns various businesses primarily in the construction products business. I am on a trajectory towards a finance role in one of the many businesses the company owns. All of these experiences were made possible through Loretta Perna and the academic support programs she has constructed through the years.

Estefani Sanchez Fonseca

My name is Estefani Sanchez Fonseca, and I am currently a sophomore at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP). I was born and raised in Jalisco, Mexico, in a small ranch called *La Palma*. I peacefully lived there to the age of eight, but then my whole life made a 180-degree shift with one impactful journey. This new yet fearful crossing was very unexpected, and it all began on one chilly dark night when my dad decided to go to *El Norte* (the North), which refers to the United States. He wanted to give my sister and me a better life. He had planned to go to the United States for months, but it was not intended that my whole family was going too. From the moment I stepped on the grounds of *El Norte*, the fear began to diminish and I started receiving assistance from many people for the different parts of my life, but it was not until I met Ms. Perna that my whole perspective and even the way I expressed myself dramatically changed.

Ms. Perna has been an important person for me throughout my high school years and now college years. She has given each and every student the most precious gift someone could ever give, her time. Not only did she give me this valuable gift, but she also gave me her friendship. Some say that their hardest school years were their middle school years, others say in their college years, mine was definitely my high school years and I can still recall a specific memory in high school that dramatically marked my whole life. This story begins with the question asked, "What is your worst fear?" I never had an answer for it, but after living in the United States for eleven years, I found the answer to be the possibility of losing my grandfather and not ever having the opportunity to say goodbye. My grandfather not only raised me, but he taught me many valuable lessons and showed me, such unconditional love. Well, my worst fear was very close to becoming a reality in the winter of 2019, my senior year of high school. I had received the most painful news I have had in my entire nineteen years of life. My grandfather, who I truly love from the bottom of my heart and who had been a father to me was threatened to death. He had to leave everything behind to protect his life and loved ones. I remember that when I received the terrible news, it was during midterms and I had to study for my language arts exam. It was difficult to focus on it, but I immediately sent a message to Ms. Perna, and the next day after finishing my exams, I went directly to her office to share my concerns. Throughout my high school years, I always talked to Ms. Perna about problems I was facing, but this could not be compared to previous ones. Trying very hard to hold back the tears, I started explaining to her the whole situation my family was facing. I remember crying and having her, my fairy godmother, by my side quietly and intently listening to me. Remembering that moment brings tears to my eyes even now, not just because it hurts to remember what my family went through, and the fear that I felt, but mostly because of the realization that I had found what I always prayed to God about, and that was finding an honest and caring friend in my life.

My parents never had all the opportunities that my sisters and I are having in the U.S. Sadly, both of them barely finished middle school in Mexico, and could not continue their studies due to the high fees schools required, such as uniforms, shoes, and books. When they both decided to come to *El Norte*, they never had in mind that their eldest daughter was going to attend college and pursue a post-secondary degree, and neither did I. They always told us to enjoy and be thankful for the educational opportunities being offered to us, and to acquire as much knowledge as possible. Being the eldest daughter of three was not easy at all. I had to face the language barrier, the constant bullying of my own *raza* (race) for not speaking English or my mispronunciations at school, plus, adapting as well as explaining a

whole new school system to my parents. When I met Ms. Perna, all this changed. Now I had someone who could not only understand what I was going through but also one who could better explain to my parents the importance of higher education and the opportunities I could have. With Ms. Perna, I was introduced to college and extra-curricular field trips, and the importance of summer academic camp programs. My parents, especially my dad, had always been very protective and this aspect of giving me permission to attend university summer programs for a week, was very hard for them. And although it was very hard for them to comprehend why attending field trips were important, I somehow always ended up convincing them. It was not until 2017 when I had the opportunity to attend a summer program at Rochester University that I needed my fairy godmother's help. During that year the United States elected a new President, Donald Trump, and my parents were very fearful of giving me permission after hearing the constant insults against immigrants, especially Mexicans. I clearly remember the afternoon Ms. Perna came to my house and explained to my parents to not be fearful of the President's words. She went on to explain the importance of attending the summer camp which focused on leadership skills. She explained how these skills would tremendously help me in the future. Thanks to her explanation, my parents finally understood the importance of field trips and summer camp programs, and also about not living in fear. Ms. Perna has been a tremendous help for my family and me. There have been many times that we have received help from her, academically and personally. Having her in my life, my parents did not have to worry about the whole college and scholarship application process. Nor about how to build a resume or how to apply for college. Ms. Perna's help not only changed my life 180 degrees, but it changed my parents' lives too. I was not the only one who moved out of their comfort zone because of Ms. Perna's guidance. My parents are truly thankful for her being in our lives.

I cannot imagine my life today without the support and friendship of my fairy-godmother. My life would be totally different in so many aspects. As stated above, my parents did not have the resources and knowledge for helping my sisters and me with a whole new school system, and neither did I. If it was not for Ms. Perna, I would not have participated in summer leadership programs, joined extracurricular activities, taken honors and advanced placement classes, understood the importance of community service, and so much more. After deeply meditating on how my life would have been without the support and friendship of Ms. Perna, it led me to believe that I would not be in my sophomore year of college, and we would have probably moved back to Mexico, and I would be married with children. Without Ms. Perna's support, my self-esteem and self-confidence would not be where it is today. Also, without her support, I would not have demonstrated to my sisters that with hard-work, determination, and humility, anything and everything is possible. This would have not been possible without the support, friendship, patience, and dedication of Ms. Perna.

Marlen Cordova-Pedroza

My name is Marlen Cordova-Pedroza, and I am a rising senior at Kennett High school. I am seventeen years old, and I am the youngest of five children. I have two older sisters who graduated from Penn State University and Immaculata University, plus two older brothers who graduated from Harvard University and Penn State University. My father immigrated to the U.S. from Mexico at the age of sixteen to work and send his earnings to my mother and two sisters living in his motherland. At first, my parents had no intention of moving to the U.S., and my father traveled back and forth to earn enough money to sustain his family living in Mexico. It was unnerving to leave everything familiar and everyone they loved to a place where all

would be foreign. Fortunately, it only took a short amount of time that Kennett Square became the perfect place to establish themselves.

My father works as a mushroom picker, and my mother works as a custodian at my high school. For many years, my parents struggled with language, food, and customs, yet after some time, they were able to navigate and survive in their new environment. My eldest sister never contemplated going to college, but when she did, our parents were totally unsupportive of the idea. She became distraught until my second oldest sister spoke with Ms. Perna and explained that my father opposed this idea, and our oldest sister was distraught. But with the help of Ms. Perna's home visits and countless hours of explanations on the importance of higher education, my father finally gave his blessing for my sister to go off to college. Little did we all know that Ms. Perna had just opened the door of opportunities for the rest of us. As the years went by, sibling after sibling, Ms. Perna continued to assist when and where she could to make sure all attended college, and now it is finally my turn.

I recall my freshman year in high school, taking as many honor classes as allowed. I had never been in any honors classes before high school, and I had no idea what I was getting myself into, to say the least. I struggled so much the first couple of months, especially in my honors Earth & Space science class. I can still recall entering Ms. Perna's room crying a couple of times because I was so stressed out about that class. I stressed out that I had studied so many hours the night before a big exam and barely obtained a passing grade. I would also become annoyed to see my peers do so well and then hear them boast about "not studying." It was difficult transitioning into a new school and then being stuck in a class that I felt I did not belong in, but Ms. Perna did not let me drop this class. She insisted that I keep pushing forward, even if that meant having to stay after school or giving up my lunch period to review the work with my teacher. And that is precisely what I did and learned that nothing worthwhile is easily obtained.

My father works as a farmworker, and my mother is a janitor in my high school. My father did not go to school because he had to financially support his family of eleven, and my mother only finished primary school. As such, my opportunity to attend higher education is limited and difficult because of economics and my parents' lack of knowledge with higher education in the U.S. Ms. Perna's help has been immensely important to my parents because where they are from, attending high school is unheard of, much less college. Convincing my parents was no easy task, but she was able to assure them that this was the best way to succeed in the U.S. Looking back at those years, my father regrets being so strict and naive with my older siblings, and today he cannot imagine a life where my siblings did not attend college. Without the help of Ms. Perna, my siblings most likely would not have attended college and would certainly not be doing the amazing things they are now doing. My parents are eternally grateful for everything Ms. Perna has done and continues to do every day for us.

I honestly believe my life today would be different without Ms. Perna's support. Her guidance and mentorship throughout these last three years have provided me with countless opportunities that have helped me grow into a more confident person—both academically and professionally. I am grateful to have Ms. Perna in my life because she has equipped me with adequate lifelong skills to continue being successful after high school. She has prepared me to go out into a world where I must work very hard to earn everything I desire. Without her, I am confident that I would not be who I am now. I honestly believe I owe all of my successes to her.

Besides being my mentor, Ms. Perna has also been like a second mother to me. Every day of the week, I go into her office, and she is always so happy to see me, and for

me, her office feels safe and welcoming, where I can share my feelings and emotions. Whether it be about a stressful class or personal issues, Ms. Perna is always there for me—never to judge, but to listen, encourage, and to give advice. Also, because of our many conversations, she was able to create and show me a path to my goals.

The Walk in Knowledge Program in which she coordinates has encouraged and provided students the opportunities to receive assistance with homework and class projects, volunteer in the community, attend college and extra-curricular field trips, plus, and summer academic camp programs. If we work hard to make the best grades and are active in the programs, we will be invited to some pretty spectacular field trips. Some of my favorite trips have been to summer camps, New York City, water parks, theaters, and many more. And while that may not seem like a huge deal, to me, it was, because I had never been to places like New York to see a Broadway musical or water parks. It was not something my family was accustomed to ever doing, so having the opportunity to do so with Ms. Perna was incredible and fun. Through Ms. Perna, I learned anything is possible if I set my mind to it. She has this phrase that has always stuck with me, “Where there is a will there's a way”. This phrase has been significant to me throughout my high school career, especially this last year, my junior year. Often, when things would not go my way, she was always there to encourage me to find an alternative, and I always did. She never let me give up or think less of myself. Little does she know that I think of her words often when I am feeling down or having second thoughts about something important yet challenging. Ms. Perna is truly inspirational to me, my family, and many more.

Angel Chimal Rodriguez

My name is Angel Chimal Rodriguez. I was born and raised in Mexico City, Mexico until I was eleven years old when my mother decided to escape from my abusive father and migrate to the U.S. for a better life. Throughout my years living in the U.S., I have known only a few people that are truly passionate about helping students succeed in their academics and helping them achieve a better life. One of those individuals is Ms. Perna. I have had the honor of knowing Ms. Perna for almost twelve years and every year that passes by, she continues to surprise me with her generosity, hard work, and dedication to her job and her students. If you have never met Ms. Perna, let me share some of my most meaningful experiences with her and how her impactful “Walk In kNowledge” (WIN) Program has shaped my life and made me a better citizen.

Fourteen years ago, I immigrated to Pennsylvania with my family. As an eleven-year-old newly arrived immigrant, and a child who did not know a word of English, attending school was exceptionally difficult for me. I remember quickly losing hope and interest and began to fall through the cracks, mainly by skipping classes and then failing them. Pursuing a higher degree after graduating from high school was never on my agenda. I believed a career in manual work was in the cards for a person like me, meaning my family was poor, uneducated, and unknowing of the higher education system. My mother was and is a single parent who worked each day as a blue-collar worker for her three young children. As the years passed, I somehow made it to high school, and this is where my life changed. My life changed when I was introduced to Ms. Perna and the WIN Program. I was fortunate to get into her program and participate in countless activities that would create remarkable memories such as college field trips, community service, trips to New York City to see Broadway musicals, and fundraising for the programs. But before that transformation, my mindset was still not in academics. I focused on playing sports and getting into trouble with my so-called, “friends.” And then, as though with a

blink of an eye, during the second semester of my senior year, my life changed. I recall a meeting with Ms. Perna asking me what my plans were for the future. I told her I was planning to do manual work so that I could financially help my family. Ms. Perna then asked, “Don’t you want to go to college? and If you do, but think you cannot afford it, why not try and earn a scholarship with your God-given gift of running? You could earn a degree in something that you are highly interested in and then help your family in the future.” Ms. Perna saw my potential as she sees in all students that she serves. She was not going to let me fall through the cracks and become a statistic. She saw I had the potential to pursue something much larger and more helpful for my future and my family. I was doubtful because I had several large cards stacked against me such as no savings money for college, having poor grades, and my legal status to name a few. However, Ms. Perna was not going to let those factors prevent me from pursuing a chance at a better quality of life. Ms. Perna became a blessing at that point and helped me find the assistance I needed to raise my grades, apply to colleges and scholarships, and supported me every step of the way. When I told my mother, I was going to apply to college and pursue a higher degree with the help of Ms. Perna, my mother cried of happiness because she wanted the best for me, and, when I was accepted, her tears of joy never stopped. During my high school years, not only did Ms. Perna assist me with my academics and my English, but she also advised me to be more aware of my surroundings, to pay attention as I go through life, plus, about the importance of first impressions, such as speaking proper English, not being late to functions, and having a firm handshake.

As I began my college career, I felt it was not designed for a student like me. My English writing was still poor, and my study habits were weak. The days were filled with work, classes, track, studying, and on top of all of that, I was still grieving the death of my father whom I had not seen since we left Mexico. I can still remember my first breaking point during my freshman year. I called Ms. Perna over the phone crying and venting about college and life in general. I told Ms. Perna, I regretted ever believing I could be successful in college and Ms. Perna calmly and encouragingly stated, “Remember how hard you have worked to be where you are right now. Remember, “where there is a will, there is a way,” and we are going to find that way and the help you need.” It was those words of inspiration that gave me the strength to continue working for a more rewarding life. I remember all the sacrifices I made in order to earn my college degree, and Ms. Perna never left my side. She continued supporting me by editing my writing assignments and checking-in on me throughout the years. Little by little my grades and my self-esteem improved.

Moreover, not only has Ms. Perna been there as a mentor to support me in my academics, but she has also been there as a true friend. Such as when I got assaulted in high school by a teammate who I believed was a buddy. I remember going to the assistant principal’s office right after the incident and when Ms. Perna came running right through the door, asking the assistant principal where I was, and when she looked in the corner and saw me bleeding with a swollen black eye, with only a one-second mutual stare and only one word, my name, coming from her unusual high-pitched voice, I said, “I know!” and then we both started tearing up. After a few minutes, without Ms. Perna saying a word, I told her what happened and why I didn’t fight back. Her response was unique as always by saying, “I’m proud of you,” at that time, I did not understand why she said that but later on I asked her what she meant by that, and she said, “It takes a lot of courage for a person who is getting beaten not to strike back and you as a friend, cared more about your friendship than he did.” At that moment, I knew I had to change, I had to remove myself from the people I hung out with and make better choices. And just like that, I became more involved

in the WIN program and started building a friendship with Ms. Perna. Her friendship not only impacted me, but it also impacted my personal life at home when I decided to tell my mom about the changes, I was planning on making for my future. Taking school more seriously and changing my life around changed my mom too. She began to fully support my decisions and it was a huge relief for her knowing that I was going to give myself the opportunity to create something bigger and better for all of us. She knew that Ms. Perna would guide me to success in anything that I chose to do. If it was not for Ms. Perna and the WIN program, my life would be completely different today. Her endless time and dedication to helping me improve not only my grades but my English too made me realize that anyone can pursue a higher degree if they believe in themselves and are not afraid to ask for help.

Lastly, I also learned from Ms. Perna the true meaning of friendship. Ms. Perna has not only been a mentor and a friend to me, but also a second parent. Many times, she was mistaken for being my mother at community volunteer races and at track meets. She attended my sports banquet when my mom could not go due to her job and checked on me while I was in and out of school. She laughed with me when we spoke about my invisible friend and cheered me up when I had problems at home and at school. She also helped me find private scholarships in her free time and taught me English. Having English classes with her was always interesting and challenging because she would not let me leave her office until I pronounced the words correctly. Ms. Perna would go above and beyond to listen to my problems and advised me with different solutions. She also cared about my family and would provide us with Thanksgiving and Christmas baskets full of delicious food. Ms. Perna has a heart of pure gold! I see how much she has done not only for me but for so many students after me. Ms. Perna has always been there for my ups and downs, and she has never judged me for my mistakes. She is always able to make time to listen to my problems and come up with different solutions, even when she has a lot of work or when she is off and enjoying her personal days. As time passes, I will continue to cherish all of the memories made and I look forward to continuing our friendship and making new memories. I will always value what Ms. Perna has taught me. During our lifetime, if we are lucky enough, we will meet at least one person who impacts our lives so greatly that we will want to aspire to be like them. These are a few things that Ms. Perna has done for me, my family, and my community.

Conclusion

The work Loretta Perna does for the Latino community and Kennett High School students through the Walk In kNowledge and Hermanitas programs as well outside the programs have a significant impact on the Kennett Square community as a whole. Her work provides students and parents who are unaware of the American higher education system process with the knowledge and tools necessary to navigate the college application process and to succeed as students at the university level. Loretta believes in all her students, including the students who have not thought about pursuing a college education as a possibility and encourages them to challenge themselves and assists them throughout their journey.

The WIN and Hermanitas Programs provide students with opportunities to attend college tours, summer camps, volunteer in the community, to travel, and to build self-confidence. Plus, opportunities to work on leadership, time-management, and critical thinking skills, as well as personal values such as staying fit and eating healthy foods. Without these programs, it would be more challenging for students to acquire these tools and experiences on their own. Most of the students' parents do not have the knowledge or skills necessary to assist their children to succeed in the

United States. The parents and oftentimes the children themselves have immigrated to start a new life in the United States but are unknowing of the paths that are available to them to succeed. Loretta Perna equips her students with the tools needed to succeed as they embark on their college and professional journeys.

The students' stories demonstrate that Loretta's work and the WIN and Hermanitas Programs have opened doors of limitless opportunities for students. Sonia's story demonstrates how her first exposure to the corporate world through an internship opened her mind and helped her envision herself as a professional. Guadalupe and Angel's story show how Loretta's mentorship expanded their vision of what they could pursue after their high school graduation and the involvement that Loretta continues to have in her students' lives beyond their KHS graduation. Whereas Estefani's story shows how the assistance Loretta and the programs provide is sought by parents who are unfamiliar with the American education system. In addition, Loretta's work involves giving students the opportunity to travel and gain experiences. Marlen, for instance, traveled to New York City to see a Broadway musical and visited water parks, experiences she hadn't been exposed to before with her family.

The programs' teachings remain part of the students' lives past their KHS graduation; Estefani remembers Loretta's proverbs when she needs encouragement. Loretta has become a mentor, friend, parent, and a fairy godmother to her students. She is an agent of change in the Kennett Square community and in return, her students continue to practice the teaching they learned from her, as Guadalupe demonstrated in her story, the values she learned are ingrained in her and she continues to volunteer her time in her community and has become a mentor to other students. The change Loretta Perna and the WIN and Hermanitas Programs enable in the community are transformational for the Kennett Square community. Mentors and leaders like Loretta lead an underserved group such as the immigrant community in Kennett Square through a path to success, on the rise to shape the future, the community, and the country.

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