

A language arts teacher helps students find their voice

Written by By Dee Velasco For the Sun
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Erika Prendas is Camille's Sidewalk CafE's Teacher of the Month

Erika Prendas, eighth grade language arts teacher at John F. Kennedy Middle School, attended the school herself as a girl, and believes teaching is her destiny.

Now, she has been selected as Camille's Sidewalk Cafe's Teacher of the Month.

Hearing news of the win surprised Prendas, but she was even more shocked and delighted that someone had nominated her in the first place. Middle school students are taught by many teachers, so the pool of potential honorees is large, making her selection all the more special.

"I honestly was surprised and thought they were kidding when I was given the news. I was shocked and then felt honored," Prendas said.

Prendas has been exceptional since long before her Teacher of the Month designation. She was the first in her family to graduate from high school, and then from college, receiving her Bachelor's degree in Elementary Education at UNM Gallup.

She began her teaching career as an education assistant at Turpen Elementary School, where she earned valuable experience and worked her way into the field that she loves.

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"I always wanted to be a teacher. In my culture teachers were always looked up to," Prendas said. "This is what I always wanted to do ever since I was a little girl, nothing else."

TEACHING COMMUNICATION

Having taught the art of reading and writing for the past seven years, Prendas has worked with many students, and is in tune to their needs. She said this particular generation of students finds it hard to grasp language arts.

Being the only bilingual Spanish-speaking teacher at school, Prendas can relate to the difficulties many students face communicating with teachers and peers.

She also understands how hard it can be for a child to speak on behalf of others.

Born in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, Prendas' parents made the move to New Mexico to build a better life for their daughter. Her parents only spoke their native language, and they soon had young Prendas communicating for them.

"My parents never had a voice, and I wanted to be that voice," she said. "They didn't have to hide from not knowing English and they could defend their children. At home my life was always Spanish and at school it was in English, when I was younger my parents wouldn't come to school functions for that very reason and I felt at times teachers thought they didn't just care, but it was the merely the struggle to communicate."

Prendas is often called to the office to be the voice for others who face this dilemma; she says she wants her students to see how language is important.

"I want them to learn how, and to see how important it is," she said. "I want them to see that language can help them, I have several shy students but eventually they open up and talk to me at the end of the year."

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Prendas says having a connection with her students is very important, and makes it a point each day to positively impact student's life. She recalls her own schooling many years ago.

"Being from the area, I know what the students are talking about. I like to talk to my kids who are having a difficult time and let them know that they can be someone," Prendas said.

Being able to relate personally to students, to their struggles and also their sense of fun, is why Prendas truly stands out in her role.

"I still have that drive inside myself since I began teaching," she said. "I shake their hands at the door every morning and even high-five them because it changes the atmosphere of the classroom. I always make it personal with them and make them feel important about what's going on in their lives."

Prendas said it's funny that some of her past teachers are now her colleagues. Being a teacher is her calling, and she said she wouldn't change a thing.

"This is my calling," she said. "Otherwise I would feel worthless. One day I hope that one student will come up to me and say, 'hey I'm a teacher because of you.' If you want to teach just do it...it's worth it honestly. 'Till then I'll keep doing this until they carry my cold dead body out of the classroom."

When she isn't teaching, Prendas likes to read, workout, and spend time with her 9-year-old daughter Annabelle, and her husband Carlos.

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