One Man's Vision Sparks a Life-Changing Program

The Sánchez Scholars Program

"When I was selected to be part of the Sánchez Scholars Program in eighth grade, I had no idea the great impact and importance the program would have in my life," said Evelyn M. Cuellar Domínguez. "It was the first time Mr. Rodriguez, one of my teachers, told me he believed in me and my future."

That was enough to shift Evelyn's vision of her future.

"I had never really looked ahead or thought about what high school, and even less what college, could look like for me," she shared. "It became my motivation to believe in myself and to know that I had a community committed to supporting and raising me."

One Man's Vision to Uplift Others

Professor Roberto García Sánchez was the only child of Mexican immigrants who settled in Corpus Christi, Texas. He maintained close ties with his family across the border and grew up fully bilingual. His parents' unwavering belief in the power of education led to his earning a PhD from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and becoming a tenured professor there.

"Professor Sánchez never forgot his humble beginnings, and was a tireless advocate for leveling the educational playing field," said Lesli Vásquez Vargas, Sánchez Scholars Program Coordinator.

When he reached retirement, he established the Roberto G. Sánchez Educational Opportunity Fund with Madison Community Foundation to help other fully bilingual first-generation students replicate his successful trajectory from community college to four-year university. And the Sánchez Scholars Program was born.

Building a Village of Support

Being a first-generation college student is challenging. Pursuing higher education involves navigating many new systems, and doing that without an experienced family member to guide you can be daunting for both students and their parents.

"Sánchez Scholars not only supported me, but also my parents who were navigating the school system in a foreign country," Evelyn said. "It takes a village to help a student be successful, and it starts with the parents."

This holistic approach to support helps build a strong community among the program's participants. "A valuable lesson I learned was that to be successful is more than being book smart," Evelyn explained. "It's important to give back to your community and build and foster relationships within it."

Staff are committed to developing and sustaining relationships between and among staff and scholars. These relationships are a crucial part of the Sánchez Scholars Program's identity, developing over the years into a "Sánchez Family."

Helping Students Explore Options

For Evelyn, choosing a post-high school path was clear. "I always knew I wanted to be a teacher because I remember many people around me, including myself, wishing they had teachers who looked like them or could relate to their experiences," she said. "I have always been a strong believer that in order to see change, you must become the change."

Incoming Sánchez Scholars, like most eighth-grade students, don't always enter the program with such clear career goals, and many may not have even considered the possibility of college.

"Scholars are in continuous contact with program staff, who monitor curriculum choices, grades and attendance," explained Vásquez Vargas.

"Depending on individual needs and interests, we coordinate career exploration, academic enrichment opportunities, community volunteer experiences and part-time employment."

Success Beyond Imagination

When Professor Sánchez created his fund, he did so hoping to help young students find a pathway to success through education, like he was able to do. And his vision has been, and continues to be, realized for students throughout the Madison Metropolitan Public Schools.

"I was a student who, according to statistics, had a high likelihood of dropping out," Evelyn said, reflecting on the program's impact on her life. "Thanks to this program, I could envision a future for myself, and it helped my parents see that there were people who cared for their daughter just as much as they did. I often wonder what my life would have looked like without the Sánchez Scholars Program."

Pathway to Success

Professor Sánchez was able to see some of the early Scholars successfully navigate the pathway he created from eighth grade to four-year degree before his death in 2016. Since its inception, the Sánchez Scholars Program has seen 83 Scholars graduate from high school (a 100% graduation rate), and currently has 22 Scholars participating.

This year the Program is welcoming the **Class of 2029** to the Sánchez Family:

- **Allan Sarantes,** from Black Hawk Middle School, will be attending East High School
- **Karla Tamayo,** from Wright Middle School, will be attending Vel Phillips Memorial High School
- **Dulce Álvarez,** from Gillespie Middle School, will be attending Vel Phillips Memorial High School
- **Edwin Torres,** from O'Keefe Middle School, will be attending East High School
- **Isaiah Vielmas,** from Sherman Middle School, will be attending East High School