

Anazco is Teacher of the Year to Her Students

by Ellyn Pak, Staff Writer, Prince Georges County Gazette

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Gina Anazco, T-C '02 teaches in a room that typifies an all-American classroom, but is filled with teaching material and books that make an unfamiliar culture less bewildering. The left wall is adorned with yellow paper and English words that her second-graders should learn during the school year. An American flag hangs nearby, to which Anazco's students pledge their allegiance but cannot immediately relate. Near her desk is an easel with

"Félicz dia de las madres!" written onto the paper. Mother's Day was approaching and Anazco's students were creating poems and cards, objects of affection that their moms will appreciate but not be able to translate. They take a spelling test shortly after.

Despite the challenges of learning the basics of a new language, the ESOL students, most of whom are Latino and refining their English, look to Anazco for reassurance and comfort. She tells them she understands. She speaks Spanish, she eats rice

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and beans, she rolls her Rs. She emigrated here 20 years ago from Ecuador with no English skills. But she made it, and they too, can do the same. That resolve to inspire her students and reach out to their immigrant parents who want to be involved but don't know how, allowed Anazco, a teacher at Chevy Chase's Rock Creek Forest Elementary School, to vie for the coveted county Teacher of the Year award.

"I think she was deserving of the award this year because she's a role model for Hispanic students," said Sandra S. Walker, principal of Rock Creek Forest Elementary School, after the announcement.

Anazco was one of four teachers who were finalists for the award and received \$250. The Montgomery County Business Roundtable for Education presented the award May 5 to Eleanor Goodwin, an English teacher at Winston Churchill High School in Potomac.

"The one thing I love about teaching is that I know I can make a difference for them," Anazco said. "I know I can instill in them the love for reading and get them better. I always tell them part of my story and I say, 'If I can make it in this country, you're going to make it too. You can be whatever you want to be.'"

Forty-four-year-old Anazco, who lives in Silver Spring, developed her love for teaching while she attended University of Guayaquil in Ecuador to pursue a bachelor's degree in education and worked as a substitute teacher. Those days are a blur for Anazco, who advanced quickly in her teaching career. Rock Creek Forest Elementary School's PTA nominated her to be a candidate for the Teacher of the Year award.

"Oh wow, that was amazing," she said of her reaction to being a finalist. "I just couldn't imagine...I never in my wildest dreams thought about it, because you're put in among hundreds of thousands of highly qualified teachers to apply for it. I got picked out of so many. So I felt lucky and blessed."

She immigrated to the U.S. in 1983 with her 2-year-old daughter, leaving behind her husband Carlos and exploring a country with little English and no knowledge of the culture. He joined her a year later and opened a towing company three years after his arrival.

"[In Ecuador] you learn how to read and write, but when I came to this country, I couldn't understand a word, especially on TV; they talk fast," she said. "It was just very overwhelming to me. I said, 'Wow, I went to school for five years and look what happened.'"

But she learned how to find resources at the local library. And she surrounded herself with Americans so she could learn the language and sharpen her listening skills. She worked as a secretary and helped her husband set up his business. She raised her daughter Carol, now 23, and her son Charlie, now 18 and a senior at Albert Einstein High School in Kensington.

Nine years after she settled in Maryland, she received a scholarship to Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore to pursue a master's degree in special education. During her graduate work,

she was an instructional assistant and substitute teacher. She then attained certification as a special education teacher. She taught at Sligo Middle School in Silver Spring for a year and then Mark Twain School in Rockville for three years. In 2000, Walker hired Anazco to fill an ESOL teacher position.

"I think she goes above and beyond the expectations of an ESOL teacher," Walker said.

Anazco coordinates a parent outreach program and is a liaison to parents of Latino students. But she goes beyond that, Walker said, by giving the students and parents tools to be successful. And there is a need for more Gina Anazcos; about 32 percent of the school population is Hispanic and most of the ESOL students are Hispanic, Walker said.

Walker said teachers work hard for their students, but Anazco



Congressman Christopher Van Hollen and Gina Anazco (Right)

goes farther by interacting with her students' parents and her colleagues. She is warm, nurturing and takes a hands-on approach to working with parents. Anazco said there needs to be more outreach to parents who are experiencing similar ordeals as their children. Adjusting to a new culture, learning a new language and finding jobs is just as overwhelming, she said.

"When you're telling them to go and find a job, and they don't have papers, they don't have resources

to even take the bus, things like that, you would think everything is easy, but it's not," she said. "Sometimes I hear parents saying, 'I had to pay the rent and I don't have money for food.' So their situations are so challenging in their lives that I feel for them."

She interacts with teachers at her school, because it is a group effort to make a child's academic experience successful. And it is less isolating for a teacher who is confined to a classroom and surrounded by paperwork.

"I know these kids," Anazco said. "So I know I can go talk to mainstream teachers about 'Johnny' and say, 'Johnny's mom is having some problems so Johnny may be behaving the way he is.' It's that kind of consultation with my colleagues."

Another teacher was given the title, but Anazco's students still consider her their "teacher of the year." A former student, now in fourth grade, greeted Anazco Friday with "Good morning, teacher of the year." When she asked him how he knew about the nomination, he replied that he read the news on the school's Web site. When she indicated that she didn't win, he replied, "It doesn't matter. You're the teacher of the year."

She said she hopes to see her former students succeed and remember that she told them that they could do anything in life. And one day, she hopes to make more changes as a principal of her own school.

"It's coming back," she said of the rewards of teaching. "The seeds that you sow are around the field and coming back growing. And you see them blossom right in front of your eyes."