

## CENTRAL VALLEY FOUNDATION

### **Partner Stories - Yolanda Valdez**

#### ***Dream Big! Work Hard! Give Back!***

This is one of the many inspiring messages found on the walls of Cutler-Orosi Unified School District in the San Joaquin Valley's rural central region. It is also a life-long theme of its dynamic and accomplished leader, Superintendent Yolanda Valdez.

Born into a family where the only language spoken was Spanish and the five children worked sun-up to sun-down in the fields alongside their father and mother, Yolanda earned her first full-time paycheck at age 12 for picking tomatoes in 110 degree heat. She reflects fondly about growing up in Orosi, attending its schools and graduating from Orosi High School. The first in her family to graduate from college and hold multiple degrees, she modestly deflects praise with, "I was just a regular kid who worked really, really hard."

Those who work with her would disagree, and describe her as "exceptional," a smart, passionate and courageous instructional leader. (They also freely quote "Yolanda-isms," her phrases and sayings aimed to support and inspire them to "get better at getting better.")

As with many English Learners who achieve success, Yolanda remembers a particular teacher, Mrs. Lucid in third grade, who explained American traditions, like apple pie and ice cream, and took a special interest in her and her success in school, "I felt cared for, nurtured and encouraged."

Recognizing the importance and powerful influence of caring, skilled teachers is inherent in Yolanda's leadership of this school district. She personally takes new staff for a drive through the local communities, where unemployment averages about 30%, 48% of students are English Learners and 100% qualify for the free/reduced meals program. She does this not to build sympathy but to show the tremendous opportunity, and responsibility, they all have to change lives. She wants them to be "relentless" in pursuing the highest standards for their students.

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She recalls her 7<sup>th</sup> grade counselor, Henry Villanueva, who told her, "You have good grades, have you ever thought about college? That's how you make your dreams come true!" She hadn't really considered college but soon was telling everyone that she was going to go to college and become a teacher (later, it would change to "become a principal"). Today, she encourages students to, "Tell your goals to everybody because they will hold you accountable."

Her personal history also inspires her outreach to families. "I know how they're living. I know what they're feeling," she explains. And she understands the questions they may have about the education system – a system that can have many barriers for English Learner students. To reach parents, she says, "I go to where they're at," by regularly visiting churches and attending community events. She shares her own background and lets them know, "I'm willing to be right in there with them because they are me and I am them."

Yolanda knows first-hand how important parents are to a student's success. In high school, she was picked to attend a five-week Migrant Education college program in San Diego. Her parents, both born in Michoacan, did not approve. Her father had served in the military in order to gain sponsorship to the U.S. and then sponsored and brought each of his family members to America. The idea of sending his eldest daughter so far from home was especially difficult and he gave his blessing only after her counselor, Mr. Cano, visited their home to make the case, saying, "I'm going to stay right here on this couch – I'm not leaving until you let her go"

As superintendent, she actively supports her students in venturing forth to participate in state and national competitions. Among the district's most recent achievements, the Orosi High School Academy of Engineering and Green Technology became a 2016 national winner in the Mobile App Development Competition hosted by the Lenovo Scholar Network. In 2016, Orosi High School's Speech and Debate Team won all local and State competitions to gain an invitation to the National Competition and represent Cutler-Orosi in Colorado. The district's students have also taken high honors in Cyberquest, Mock Trial and many more competitions that help students prepare to compete in a global economy. This is Yolanda's goal - to share the outstanding talents and capabilities of her students and demonstrate to others "what these 'disadvantaged' children can really do." Indeed!