

# Finding Their Way

By Sherry Squires

**W**hen Angelica Sandoval dropped out of high school last spring, she figured her educational endeavors were finished.

She didn't dislike school. But after repeatedly missing days to help her family, which depends on agricultural work in the fields, she felt lost.

"I got behind, and then the classes got harder and harder," she says. "I couldn't catch up." So she opted out last April.

But in late November, the High School Equivalency Program (HEP) at Boise State latched on to Sandoval, and she's now on her way to earning her diploma.

Sandoval is typical of the teens HEP targets, says associate director Michelle Kelley. The federally funded program recruits students whose families are migrant or seasonal farmworkers. About 95 percent of them are Hispanic. They have left school to baby-sit siblings, or are in the fields working alongside their parents to help support the family. And most are at least a year behind in school.

HEP, which is administered by the College of Education, has federal funding to help about 60 students per year. Since the program began 16 years ago, about 800 students have earned GEDs.

HEP recruiter Ricardo Morales travels across Idaho to find prospects, visiting with high school counselors, the Idaho Migrant Council and other agencies looking for positive places to refer kids. He even visits laundromats, labor camps and churches.

Once he persuades the

students to come, HEP teachers and tutors go to work overcoming the barriers that have kept the students from success. Often, those amount to a break in communication between the teen and the school. Or, a lack of the individualized attention that some students need.

HEP creates a whole new environment for the students. The program pays for their transportation to Boise from the mostly rural areas where they live. They live in residence halls at Boise State, with their meals and housing paid for while they work toward their GED. They attend class each day in one classroom, with the same teachers.

And for most, the formula works.

"You can't sit in class and not do anything," says Kelley, who taught in the program for 12 years before assuming an administrative role. "The teachers are going to know. Because of the small group, we have that time."

BOBIE BETHES MOYER

Kelley says the HEP teachers and the residence hall setting also provide a makeshift family structure for the students. They attend activities together, get together at a teacher's house to cook a meal, and even see teachers interacting with their own children.

"We become mentors to them," Kelley says. "Some kids, we'll really make an impact with. You'll really see them make a change in their lives. You plant lots of seeds, and you never know when they're going to sprout."

Most who attend HEP earn their GED in a couple of months. About 70 percent of them go on to the Job Corps, the military or to higher-paying jobs. A few return home. A handful decide to stay and attend college.

Some are encouraged to participate in Boise State's College Assistance Migrant

Program, or CAMP, which helps shepherd them through their first year of college.

Whatever they decide to pursue after HEP, they have had a second chance, Kelley says. And, hopefully, a new appreciation for education.

"What we do is important in trying to reach teens," she says. "There are too many success stories for us not to believe that we're making a difference." □



*Above: HEP associate director Michelle Kelley and students Daniel Rodriguez, left, and Marco Mendoza make ice cream as part of a science project. At left: HEP teacher Karen Benjamin discusses science concepts with student Crystal Via Gomez, right.*

