

Fighting the Odds

BSU Hispanic students talk about their experiences in Idaho schools

LUCY RAMIREZ, 19, was born and raised in Rupert. She is the current president of the *Organización de Estudiantes Latino-Americanos (OELA)* and also a BSU Ambassador. She is a sophomore majoring in accounting.

ANTONIO TELLEZ, 26, has been in the U.S. for five years. Born in Michoacan, Mexico, he came to this country to learn English. He plans to return to Mexico after he receives his degree in international business. He lives in Rupert.

MARTHA MOSQUEDA, 19, was born in Jalisco, Mexico and has lived in Caldwell since she was 8 years old. She is the vice president of OELA. A sophomore, she plans to major in psychology.

Q *How did your school react to the fact that you couldn't speak English very well?*

Martha: My school was pretty good because my teacher was bilingual. He was the only bilingual teacher in the whole school and he happened to be my homeroom teacher. They also had a teacher who would help us learn English and help us with other classes. They did have a lot of students who were migrants who would come here. A lot of them were from Texas. So they had a lot of students that needed help.

Antonio: When I went to high school sometimes the teacher did not know how to treat me. They wanted me to be there, but at the same time they did not know what to do or how to communicate with me. The same thing with me — I did not know how to communicate with them.

Lucy: There was one experience that I had in the first grade that I will always remember. There were three of us in the class — we were the only Hispanic students. We were put in the lowest reading class. The teacher taught us how to get rid of our accent or to pronounce words "right." We would go to her class twice a week. They automatically put us in the lowest reading class. They just assumed that, "Oh she's just a Hispanic student — she probably doesn't know English very well." I still remember that experience.

Martha: In Mexico I think the math classes were a little more advanced. When I got here I was doing things that I had already done. They put me in the lowest math class with the bilingual teacher — they didn't realize that I could do better and they really didn't care.

Q *You hear a lot about the high dropout rate of Hispanic students in Idaho. Do you have any theories as to why that is?*

Martha: I think it has a lot to do with wanting to belong. When they see that their friends are dropping out, they think "What am I going to do when my friends are gone? Who am I going to eat lunch with? Who am I going to sit with in class?" They don't think they can make it by themselves when their friends start to go. When a white student would think about dropping out counselors took more interest. But when there was a Hispanic student going to drop out they thought, "Oh well, that's what they do." They didn't think, "Let's see what we can do to help the situation."

Lucy: When my best friend dropped out, another one dropped out too, then another one, and by the time I got to high school all of my friends from junior high had dropped out. I had totally new friends in high school because the others were all gone. I think family was another thing. Some of them had parents who were divorced. Some of them were the oldest, so they did not have anyone to tell them to stay in school. Others had brothers and sisters who did not want to go to school either.

Antonio: My situation was a bit different because I came to the U.S. to study and I was also older. But it still is very complicated for people like me to understand the the community.

We have to change societies, and it is really confusing. In Mexico I had a lot of friends. I was very sociable. Here I feel like I can't be that way because of the language barrier. It is difficult to understand how the Americans behave. I have to be open-minded because the culture is different.

Lucy: You need a support system. The teachers, like Antonio said, don't know what to do. They think "What can I do with this kid? I can't communicate with him; he can't communicate with me." They need to hire bilingual teachers. It is a necessity because at my high school communication with non-English-speaking students is a problem. The number of Hispanic students who come into the school and don't know English has gone up. The language barrier for those types of students is definitely a problem.

Martha: There is another issue. A lot of the students don't really try to get along with people who they feel have authority over them. They rebel. When a student doesn't respect a teacher, the teacher won't take the time to respect him back. A lot of Hispanic students have that "you-can't-tell-me-what-to-do" attitude. So the teacher says, "Okay, then I won't tell you what to do." Then they phase off and drop out. The teachers don't care about them.

Q *You have gone to college. You have done something that is a little different than your friends. Do your friends resent that?*

Martha: By 10th grade that pressure is phased out. I had an accelerated honors English class and the other students' reactions would be, "Wow, how can you do that? There is no way I could do that." I wished they could have all done it, but they didn't want to try. They weren't interested in getting into a higher class. They were content with their Cs when they could have got Bs or As. Nobody told them any better. It has a lot to do with your family.

Lucy: It does. Our families come from Mexico and they can't help us with our homework. We have to help them with what they need. Instead of my dad helping me with my math class, I helped him with his math class and his English class. A lot of the students don't have

the motivation from their families. Some may be dysfunctional families or low-income families where they don't have a lot of education.

Martha: I think anything that we did in school we did because we wanted to. Any efforts we made came from us because nobody was going to help us. If we asked the teacher they would always be happy to help. But we could never go home and say, "Mom, I can't understand this problem, can you help me out". If I came home and said "Mom I got an A," she'd say, "That's great; what's an A?"

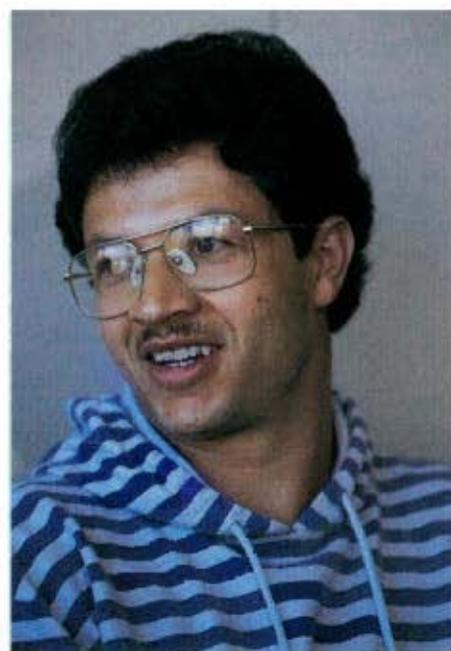
Q *Do Hispanic students need more role models?*

Lucy: We need someone to look up to. It is sad that some people don't have someone to look up to.

Martha: Usually Hispanic students who don't have role models are not very positive. They don't see anything good. They just see negativity of things. It takes a while before you can really see how people bring you down. When you first get here you think, "Oh, this is the U.S. — the land of opportunity." You come here wanting to do everything, but after a while you start seeing that maybe they don't want you here.

Q *Some have observed that students who have recently come from Mexico are more motivated than those who were raised here.*

Lucy: When they barely arrive they are more motivated and work harder to understand all of their studies. This is a big difference. A lot of students come here to work. I know a lot of students drop-out because they get behind in school. I know a lot of students wouldn't go to the



Antonio Tellez

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Martha Mosqueta

first semester of school because they had to work in the harvest. They get really behind when they finally start school and they can't do it, so they drop out.

Martha: I knew a family where the dad came here to work. Once the harvest season started, he would pull his kids out of school.

Q *Have you personally experienced discrimination?*

Martha: Not from my teachers. In grade school there was this little girl who came up to me and said, "The other day me and my mom were driving by a field and she told me, 'Look at all those wetbacks out there working.' I bet you work like them too, huh?" I just looked at her. Then she said "You're just a wetback aren't you?" I just sat down and didn't know what to say or do. It gave me a really bad attitude, and that is why I never really had any white friends, just acquaintances. It is hard to think that just that one person changed my view that much. I can see why white people would be prejudice against Hispanics because I can see how it happened to me. One person can make that much of a difference.

Antonio: I am very proud of being Mexican. Here it is different than in Mexico. Here, being a Mexican is being a troublemaker. The other day I was playing soccer and this guy asked me if I was Mexican. Sometimes it bothers me that people ask me. I just don't see why it would matter. Why are they asking? I don't like it at all.



Lucy Ramirez

Q *Do you feel that young Hispanics are becoming more aware of their culture? And becoming more proud?*

Antonio: A friend of mine was not very proud of being Mexican here. He did not know his roots. The American society doesn't open the door to say: "Come, you're welcome to our culture."

Martha: When I was little I was pushed into changing, but I still kept my parents' tradition and values. You have to realize that you are in a different country. You also have to be open-minded enough to at least try to live with it if you can't accept the way things are done here.

Q *If you could make our schools better for Hispanics, what would you do?*

Lucy: One main goal would be to hire more Hispanic faculty or counselors. The percentage of Hispanic students to percentage of white students would be how we would figure the faculty numbers. Here our biggest problem would be Hispanics and Anglos but in California we would also concentrate on blacks, Hispanics, Anglos, Orientals — all kinds. I think they need to do that because it is really important for the students' progress.

Antonio: I think the professors have to be aware of the situation of the Hispanics. They have to receive training so they can understand Hispanic students. Also there is a need to hire more Hispanic faculty.

Martha: I think a good solution would be to have students be more aware of their own culture, educating themselves about themselves along with other students and teachers.

Q *What do you think the role of your generation is to make life better for future Hispanics?*

Lucy: What I wanted was more role models; then I should be role models for other students. I'm going to put my education to use in educating our sons and daughters.

Antonio: My responsibility is to get my degree first and once people see that I will be a good role model for them even though I don't speak English very well. I will be a role model for those students who are like me and want to get somewhere.

Martha: I would like to use my experience. I would like to become so educated myself about my own culture that I could educate other people. We are lucky because we could take the best out of the Hispanic culture and the best out of the white culture, and live with both of them to make our lives better. □