

Networking effort shows Latinos path to success

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LOWELL — The dropout rate of Latino students at Lowell High School, 19.8 percent in 2008, clocks in at more than double that of white (8.2 percent) or black (6.1 percent) students, a figure Maria Cunha is working to curb through the Latino Connections program.

The program, a collaboration with Middlesex Community College, provides bilingual/bicultural case management services for Latino students and their families, as well as mentoring and job shadowing, giving students the opportunity to network with successful Latinos in the community who have overcome some of the same challenges they face today.

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"Sometimes the students just need that extra boost, a little support," said Cunha. "We work with them to build on the skills that will lead to their success."

This summer, Cunha teamed up with the Career Center of Lowell to place students in summer internships in locations across the city, including The Registry of Deeds, Juvenile Court, *The Sun*, Middlesex Community College and Enterprise Bank.

"It is all about giving these kids opportunities to learn and gain experience, as well as making connections," said Cunha. "The connections they make while in high school will provide them with doors they can always come back to and knock on."

Shaniece Custis, a 17-year-old LHS senior, figured her internship, at Acre Family Day Care, would mean a few hours a day of playing with kids.

She was wrong.

"At first we figured she could be a bus monitor or something; we were not sure what to expect," said Isadora Hurtado, who coordinated the center's summer program.

"But once we saw Shaniece's skill set, we realized she would not spend one day as a bus monitor."

Instead, she was in the office, working to plan events and activities that without her assistance never would have gotten off the ground for the hundreds of low-income and immigrant children who utilize the center's summer program.

"I got to experience a lot of things I otherwise would never have had the opportunity to," Custis said. "I met some really great people like Isadora and (Executive Director) Kathy (Reticker) and learned a lot about myself and working with people."

There was a trip to the Discovery Museum in Acton, a

fishing derby in the canal, and an ice cream social and field day.

"Shaniece's hard work enabled us to do things we otherwise could not have done for our kids this summer," said Reticker.

"She was right beside me all summer, open to learning and doing anything that needed to be done," Hurtado said. "The experience was as important for us as it was for her. I don't know what we will do without her this year."

Custis assures the staff that she will be back to volunteer at the center because she enjoyed her time there so much. This week she returns to Lowell High School for her senior year and will be applying to Boston College, Boston University, Suffolk University and UMass Amherst.

She is a little torn about what she would ultimately like to do, Maybe law school. Maybe working for a non-profit or working with kids.



Acre Family Day Care intern Shaniece Custis spent her summer on big projects. SUN/JON HILL

Custis said she thinks the dropout rate among Latino students is high because many students let family issues supersede all else in their lives.

"They end up blowing off

school because of bad situations at home," she said. "They really should take education more seriously than they do and deal with the family stuff later. The only way to get out of a bad situa-

tion is through education."

Custis added that, especially at Lowell High School, "if you need help there is someone there to help, you just need to ask. The support is great."