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Afghan Vet Inspires Salinas Youth to be Brainy, Brave and Beautiful

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Article By: *Amanda D. Stein*

The 2010 winner of the Miss Latina World title, Valencia de la Vega, is the kind of woman plenty of parents would love their young girls to look up to. At first glance, she is confident and poised. She is well-spoken and captivating. And beneath her crown, de la Vega is about much more than competing for her title. She is a former U.S. Army Captain with a nuclear engineering degree from West Point, a master's degree in finance, and is currently an engineer for Intel. And when it comes to inspiring young women, her message is simple – embrace your brain, as well as your beauty.

On May 18, de la Vega shared her story in a bilingual presentation, sponsored by the Community College Catalyst (3C) internship program, a joint effort between the Naval Postgraduate School's Cebrowski Institute and Hartnell Community College. The program helps inspire an interest in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields among young people in Monterey County.

"De La Vega's visit was inspirational, particularly for young women," said Alison Kerr, 3C Director. "Going to college, pursuing STEM careers not only helps replace the aging STEM workforce, it contributes to our national security."

De la Vega spoke about her humble childhood, and the exciting career that began after seeing the opportunities and success her grandfather found in the military.

"I came from a community where we didn't have money. My family didn't have the opportunity to go to college or to school. My mom was a single mom," said de la Vega, showing a slide with activities and achievements ranging from receiving a degree to jumping out of an airplane as an Army Lieutenant. "I'm not here to brag, or to say 'I did all of this. Look at how great this is.' The reason why I'm here is to share my story, and to say that our children in our community can do that too."

Today, as an engineer for Intel, De La Vega proudly wears her high heels with her lab coat. Her message for young women is that it is possible to be 'brainy, brave, and beautiful,' and to be open to new and exciting opportunities.

"At Intel, I design test equipment so I can test processors that go into computers. And it takes a lot of math, a lot science, and a lot of engineering," she added. "You can be strong, you can be beautiful, and you can be smart. You can be all three."

In addition to encouraging young people to embrace education and be confident in themselves, she spoke about the importance of being a global citizen, and encouraged parents to help their kids be open to a world beyond their immediate environment.

"The message that I want to send is to be global citizens. Think bigger than Salinas. Think bigger than California. Think bigger than the United States," de la Vega said. "Think about the globe, and think about all of the opportunities that you have as students to go all over the world. I want to make sure that we tell our children how important it is that they can go see how beautiful the rest of the world is."

She spoke about her own travels, both during her time in the military, and as a civilian, and how her interactions with different cultures helped open her eyes to the opportunities that so many Americans might take for granted.

"Part of being a global citizen is understanding what it means to support other countries in their pursuit of democracy, their pursuit of education and women's rights. I had no idea the struggles that many of the countries go through until I joined the military and I saw firsthand how fortunate we are here in the United States," de la Vega explained. "I realized that I did have opportunities once I got out of the military to be things that women in other countries will never have the opportunity to be. I definitely think that being in the military helped me understand how fortunate I am to be a woman in the United States."

Women are currently under-represented in the STEM fields, a gap that the C3 program hopes to help fill with eager, successful young ladies. The C3 internship program pairs Hartnell students with summer internships in labs across the NPS campus, providing them an opportunity to experience science firsthand with scientists and researchers there to guide them.

Dr. Phoebe Knight Helm, President of Hartnell Community College, commented on the value of having role models like de la Vega available to students, to give them something to aspire to. De la Vega's visit was coordinated as part of a full weekend of community-outreach activities, including the Hartnell Science and Health Day and a special alumni event at the Steinbeck House. At each event, de la Vega had a chance to reach more young people as an ambassador for the STEM fields.

"For this community and for these young people, the goal is to put someone like Miss Latina within their reach, and help them see that it's real. Almost more importantly is to have the parents here to see what is available for their children," said Helm, noting that opportunities to meet and work with real scientists create lasting impressions for young people. "The Naval Postgraduate School is just amazing in the sense of being a real part of our community. We are so lucky to have that resource here."

Four former 3C interns were in attendance at the presentation -- Angelica Meza, Christopher Halcon, Genaro Sanchez, and Leonel Medrano -- each with their own personal successes and dreams, and all proud to have had the opportunity to be mentored by NPS scientists. They explained that hearing from de la Vega only helped further encourage them to keep pushing themselves.

"For me personally, it makes me feel like everything that I have worked hard for is worth it, especially coming from a woman. There were a lot of things for me in particular that made this really special. Being of Latino background, being a woman ... every girl wishes to be Miss something," said Meza, a former intern in the NPS Aerospace Engineering lab. "So it's really neat to see that this woman who won Miss Latina World is not only pretty, she's brave and she's incredibly smart to be a nuclear engineer. So it's awe inspiring."

Posted on May 30, 2012



Miss Latina World 2010, Valencia de la Vega, shares her story with students and their families, May 18 in a special event sponsored by Hartnell Community College and the Naval Postgraduate School's Cebrowski Institute. De la Vega, an engineer for Intel, spoke about the value of education, and the need for more young women to be involved in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

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