

Barriers

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they didn't have the chance to attend school," Bonifacio Herrera said.

Ninth grade is the average amount of formal schooling most farmworkers in the United States have completed, with 35% reporting their formal education stopped in the sixth grade or earlier, according to the National Agricultural Workers' Survey, a report prepared for the Department of Labor.

"The application process/high school to university is really difficult, especially as a low-income, BIPOC," said Aide Robles Rodriguez, also a recent graduate of Woodburn's AIS High School. "This whole process was never built for BIPOC, it was built for white men. I was really lucky to have made it to this position in terms of having a plan for college."

'Something I'm passionate about'

Robles Rodriguez, 18, will soon start classes at Chemeketa Community College. She's the first in her immediate family to attend college.

For her, part of that journey means having a different relationship with work than her parents, who work at a nursery in the Mid-Valley.

"The way they live, working is to live, not to enjoy, because that's how they survived. But for me, I want to do something I'm passionate about and not just work, work and work," Robles Rodriguez said.

When she shared with her parents her plans to major in Indigenous studies and environmental studies, she said, they wondered why she didn't want to take a path, such as a trade program, that would allow her to enter the workforce sooner.

Several conversations later, her parents are more open to her plans and are committed to supporting her, Robles Rodriguez said, though her path contrasts with theirs. They've worked in the fields for most of their lives, and her mother even picked strawberries, blueberries, cauliflower and kiwi while pregnant.

"It makes me really mad and sad at the same time that my mom had to work while I was in her womb," she said, adding that they deserve to be appreciated for more than just their strong work ethic. "My parents deserved rest."

She's the eldest of six siblings ranging from ages 8 – 18, a role she said hasn't always been easy.

She struggled in some reading and math courses in elementary school in Woodburn but devoured books such as the "Magic Treehouse" series and always easily filled out her reading logs, a habit she has since channeled into reading young adult novels and history books.

In middle school, she earned her first "F" on an assignment, which she attributes to not knowing how to ask for help. But as high school neared, it prompted her to learn how to seek help from teachers and other adults.

After she had failed (and later recovered credit for) a language arts class freshman year, her priority was succeeding in all her courses. For Robles Rodriguez, 10th grade was a turning point.

That year, she joined the dance team at Woodburn's AIS High School after dancing to covers of K-Pop songs with her friends and she spent the last three years of school performing at games and traveling to dance competitions around the state.

'It was difficult'

Karina León, the eldest of four siblings, also took to heart that success in high school would be critical for future plans.

She, along with Robles Rodriguez, has lived at an apartment complex run by Farmworker Housing Development Corporation for most of her life. She described it as a close community where people have similar schedules, they know most of their neighbors, and it's easy for kids to make friends.

The organization develops affordable housing and provides other support to low-income farmworker families in the Mid-Valley.

León, whose first language is Spanish, started English-as-a second-language classes in elementary school and described struggling to learn to read in English.

By middle school, she had become much more comfortable in English and now reads constantly in the language. She especially loves fantasy books.

Middle school was a new experience for her whole family, she said, as her parents didn't attend middle school. It also was the point when her parents



Adabella Bonifacio Herrera, the child of farmworkers, poses for a portrait outside of PCUN in Woodburn, Ore. Sept. 8. She will soon begin cosmetology school in Mexico. BRIAN HAYES / STATESMAN JOURNAL

could not help her as much with homework.

"They were proud because I was doing better. My English had improved and I could do my homework by myself, but it was difficult," León, now 19, said.

Her experiences learning English and translating for her parents at the grocery store, when making appointments and while filling out paperwork were the focus of her college application essay. She plans to major in public health after attending Chemeketa Community College.

"It was really frustrating when it was like, 'I'm stuck, I can't translate this.' I think that's also why I pushed myself to learn English and learn it well," León said. "I've always been one of those private people, and it did feel hard to put it all on paper."

León spent much of high school at AIS volunteering. Through Key Club, she helped raise money for the club, coordinate yard work in the community and start a community garden.

She also ran for an officer position, coordinating public relations in the National Honor Society, a group her language arts teacher Susan Droke advises. Droke said León challenged herself to take on that role, something many students are hesitant to do.

León is drawn to public health because she's always wanted to help people and sees it as a degree with many options.

Droke said León's interest in the many paths in public health reflects her curiosity, which she saw during a project León completed on Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers.

"When she has a question, she will do the research and she's careful in the research that she chooses and in the words she chooses to express herself. She went a step beyond, that's Karina," Droke said. "For many of the students that I've worked with over the years at AIS particularly, their parents have worked so hard to come to the United States to give their students a good education, one that they have not had themselves, and Karina and many students, they honor the work their parents have done."

'Proud to be able to speak 3 languages'

Bonifacio Herrera also is used to translating for her parents, from English to Spanish to Mixteco, the language they speak at home.

She learned Spanish when she began preschool in Cuesta Blanca, Oaxaca.

Leaving Mexico at age 11 so her parents and some of her seven siblings could begin jobs at a nursery and picking strawberries in the Mid-Valley meant saying goodbye to her grandmother and friends and entering a world where almost everything was different, down to the flavor of tortillas, she said.

She understood little of what was happening in summer school, and when school began in the fall, a group of girls made fun of her for struggling to speak English. She didn't tell anybody, she said, because she didn't want problems.

Things started looking up when she made friends with other girls also learning English. They remained close throughout high school.

As a child, Bonifacio Herrera dreamed of being a doctor or neonatal nurse.

"I forgot about it once I arrived here," she said.

But she didn't lose sight of her parents' encouragement to study and her own goals. She eventually discovered her interests in beauty and skincare when one of her sisters graduated high school and Bonifacio Herrera was dis-

appointed she lacked the skills and tools to do her sister's make-up.

As she settled in at school, she joined the soccer team her junior year and enjoyed tackling more advanced material in her classes, such as reading "Como agua para chocolate" in her Spanish class, where she realized she had similarities with headstrong protagonist Tita.

"With my siblings, I speak English and Spanish, but there's always a Mixteco word in there. But sometimes it gets a bit difficult because when I'm at home, I have to speak Mixteco so my parents will understand, and when I'm with my friends, we speak more Spanish because we're more used to it than English, and I use English only when I really need it," Bonifacio Herrera said. "I'm proud to be able to speak three languages ... and I'm not ashamed to be a Oaxacan Mexican woman."

Looking ahead while embracing history

In the 10th grade, all three women joined the CAPACES Leadership Institute's TURNO program, which encourages young people, primarily from Latino and in many cases farm working families, to develop their leadership skills, serve their communities and plan for their futures.

Robles Rodriguez described the program as a safe community where people can relate to each other, get support as they navigate high school and the college application process, and find opportunities to connect with their cultures.

León said TURNO provided a support group because the program coordinators have also been the first in their families to attend college and have experience decoding the unwritten rules of the U.S. education system and filling in with help and advice the students' families may be unable to provide.

She said TURNO helped her understand the value of community college, and supported her in planning her college application essay and making a decision about which school to attend.

Robles Rodriguez explained similar ideas to her parents, she said: the structure of the application process, the importance of the college application essay, why the FAFSA student aid application matters, the difference between subsidized and unsubsidized student loans, and handling rejections from universities.

TURNO and Anahuac, a program that connects youth and families to traditional agricultural and culinary practices, helped further Robles Rodriguez's interests in Indigenous and environmental studies. And she recently completed a summer internship with Anahuac, where she saw the interconnectedness between her two fields of interest.

"Through the Anahuac program, I've been reconnecting with my Indigenous ancestors and past and identity," Robles Rodriguez said. "It's important that Indigenous communities and advocates are at the front lines. They should be the ones leading the (environmental) movement because it's very white-led."

Karina Guzmán Ortiz, a former TURNO program manager and member of the Salem-Keizer school board, met Robles Rodriguez when she was on the panel interviewing her for the role in 2019. She asked Guzmán Ortiz, "What are your thoughts on climate change?"

Guzmán Ortiz said the direct question reflected Robles Rodriguez's beliefs and curious attitude.

"Asking that question, for me it spoke volumes of her values, her thoughts, and her priorities," Guzmán Ortiz said.

"She isn't somebody who takes up a lot of space in a conversation or a room, but through conversations or follow-up questions will let you know she was listening and took a lot away."

Bonifacio Herrera said participating in TURNO taught her to identify her own leadership skills and lose some of the fear attached to entering new spaces and meeting new people.

"I saw her desire to get involved and learn more about civic engagement," Fabiola Ramos, another former TURNO program manager, said. "She enjoys working with the community. She enjoys learning new things and also, she likes challenges."

Working with Anahuac also reminded Bonifacio Herrera of the town where she grew up, a place she's returning for cosmetology school before coming back to Woodburn in February to earn her cosmetology license.

"It's beautiful to share your culture with other people, and especially with children. They're going to become more interested, and they'll ask their parents more questions, and they can share their own experiences and what they remember their parents and grandparents doing," she said.

In her work with Anahuac, León coordinated a group of mothers who taught children in the program how to make mole using traditional tools like a metate and molino they had, in many cases, not used since they themselves were young.

She heard stories from their youth and connected with her own mother in a new way as she described preparing offerings to the earth during her childhood in Oaxaca.

"It was really powerful. I knew she had a tough childhood, but it was nice hearing it from her and then having her have a group of women who understood what she lived through and even honored it and kept it close," León said. "We learn from each other, and I learn something new every workshop together."

'It's something new for all of us'

Planning their next steps during the pandemic complicated their plans as all classes and activities became virtual and the three women worried about the health of their families.

They navigated trying to study while many siblings were home at the same time, and battled Zoom fatigue while making decisions that will shape the next phases of their lives.

Bonifacio Herrera completed five months of distance learning last year in Mexico, as her father began experiencing health problems and wanted to recuperate there. Her older siblings, some of whom have attended and graduated from Chemeketa, remained in Oregon. She returned to Woodburn in January, where she has since been practicing her make-up, nail and skincare skills.

She wants to explore the possibility of opening her own salon with a friend who's learning how to cut, color and style hair.

For her, it's also been a summer of worrying about her parents, who have continued working amid three heat waves in the Mid-Valley this summer and renewed attention on heatstroke risks after a nursery worker died in June.

"I worry — what if something happens to them?" Bonifacio Herrera said.

León said her father is fortunate the pandemic didn't impact his job at a seed company, where he mostly works indoors. But she sees how late many of her neighbors return from work and has heard of occasional workplace injuries they've sustained.

Robles Rodriguez said she regularly told her parents to drink water and take breaks during this summer's extreme temperatures and was frustrated they had to continue working regular schedules during one of the heat waves.

"I was confused why they didn't get sent home earlier," she said.

These days, she's taking a break after her job at Mega Foods in Woodburn, refreshing her science knowledge by watching Khan Academy videos, and serving as a guide to her younger siblings.

One of her sisters is two years younger and saw Robles Rodriguez go through the process of completing college applications, filling out the FAFSA, and making a decision.

León described a similar dynamic in her family and what it means for her to take this step.

"I think they're just glad I'm continuing my education," she said. "(My siblings) also are excited for me because it's something new for all of us."

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