



Students at King Elementary School in northeast Portland listen to the experiences of Ricardo Lopez, who works to prevent gangs through Catholic Charities.



Adriana Lopez-Garcia, a Catholic Charities gang-prevention case manager, encourages Rose Murdock's fifth graders to think about the future.

Mentors Break the Mold Students gain inspiration

BY RAYMOND RENDLEMAN
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Many schools across town have been making an extra effort lately to attract role models that would help students overcome odds.

The endeavors come as leaders locally and nationally have recognized the significance of kids relating with adults of

similar backgrounds. Most of these programs happen through a volunteer effort that garners no direct financial assistance.

Take a classroom at King Elementary School in northeast Portland that is approximately half African-American and half Latino students, for instance. Rose Murdock's 21 fifth graders welcome regular visits from people working in the com-

munity, and the after-school volunteer chess teacher organizes the experiences through his passion for holistic education.

"It's important that they talk to someone who looks like them and who's been to college," says Ron Popkin, who makes furniture in southwest Portland when he's not playing chess. "We're trying to get

them to see that their skin color is not a barrier to achieving anything they want in life."

Having filled her life with counseling, paper grading and lesson planning, Murdock appreciates some help from the outside to coordinate the hour-long weekly visits.

"The kids need exposure to the differ-

ent things that are out there," she says. "I try to bring in all the people and activities that I would have liked to have had."

On a recent afternoon, three employees from Catholic Charities' Latino Services stopped by as part of their work preventing gangs. Gangs weren't the main topic of conversation, however. The focus stayed on how education broadens the possibilities for comfortable lifestyles.

One of the speakers, Ricardo Lopez, used the dry-erase board to calculate the shortfall a typical worker with a high-school degree would experience while trying to pay for food, transportation, rent and healthcare. Later in the visit, Gang Outreach Specialist Temo Bautista asked students to raise their hands if they were planning to go to college. Not one student kept both hands down.

Bautista then pointed to a "10 ways to be a good student" poster on the classroom wall, and said, "They're providing all the basic information and guidelines you'll need throughout life." The mandates to have materials organized and come to school every day translate into punctuality and planning required for working, he explained.

Lopez, who identifies as half-black, spoke to the Portland Observer beforehand about how kids from gang-affected neighborhoods already know about subjects that constitute their life drama. He spoke to the class about concentrating on education and sports while he was growing up in East Los Angeles.

"Yeah, I get a check for what I do, but the bigger check is knowing that I help people," he told them.



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