

Stockton Record

Teacher of year leans on life experiences

Edison High science educator Nicole Gonzalez earns statewide recognition

By Roger Phillips
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STOCKTON - When Nicole Gonzalez looks at her Edison High School students, it's as if she is staring into a mirror and seeing a reflection of herself from a dozen years ago.

Back then, she was 17 - wrestling with the latter days of a difficult childhood, struggling to make the right choices, hoping to beat the odds and build a better life. Today as an Edison science teacher, she strives to help a new generation of students, many facing personal challenges, to retrace her footsteps.

"It's not easy," the 29-year-old Gonzalez tells her students of the road they are traveling. "You can't be afraid to ask for help."

This week, Gonzalez's dedication to her students was recognized when she received the Michael McKibbin Outstanding Educator of the Year Award. The statewide award, presented by the California Teacher Corps, is named for one of the pioneers in the development of programs that provide alternate routes into the teaching profession.

Gonzalez became a teacher through one such program, Project Impact at the San Joaquin County Office of Education. Project Impact provides a path into teaching for people who already have bachelor's degrees, and many of its participants are second-career professionals.

Gonzalez graduated in 2005 from the University of California, Santa Barbara, with a science degree but lacked clearly defined career aspirations. During this period of uncertainty, she returned home to Manteca and went to work as a substitute teacher.

"I totally fell in love with teaching," Gonzalez recalled. "I felt like this was what I was supposed to do."

Subbing led her to Project Impact, where the path to a teaching credential is a combination of classroom study and internships. After completing Project Impact, Gonzalez enrolled at the county office's Teachers College of San Joaquin, where she is close to completing her master's degree in education.



Twelve years ago, Gonzalez could not have envisioned this path. The oldest of seven children raised by a single father, she grew up in the Bay Area and in Manteca. She says she grew up knowing gang members and that some of her peers are serving prison sentences today. Her past makes her uniquely qualified to relate to many of the students she encounters.

In her third year at Edison, Gonzalez teaches a 10th-grade class where students learn hands-on health-career skills such as suturing and blood-typing, and an 11th- and 12th-grade anatomy and physiology class.

Once a week, she has her students come to class in business attire. They practice firm handshakes and making strong eye contact, the sorts of skills that will serve them well in job interviews.

Four days a week, Gonzalez is one of the teachers leading Edison's after-school program for students who have fallen behind on their credits. When students bring their problems to her, Gonzalez always listens.

"She's just somebody you can go to for advice, just somebody to talk to," senior Carina Cabrera said. "I talk to her a lot about my life, what I've been through. I know she cares a lot about her students."

Catherine Kearney, the dean of Teachers College, added, "I don't think there is anything she won't do to make sure her students are successful. She is a role model in that she is a woman of color in science. When her students listen to Nicole, she's an example: 'I can do that, I can be whatever I want to be.' In our schools, that's really important."

Gonzalez is the first to acknowledge that the path for many of her students is a rocky one.

"It is hard," she said, "but if you can do well while you are here, I will try my hardest to get you to that next level. In high school, I had teachers who took the time to get to know me. They knew my situation and helped me get to college.

"When I became a teacher, I said, 'That's what I want to do. I want to help the ones I can as much as I can.' "