

LAA's 2012 youth conference draws close to 2,000 for day full of activities at Emory

13th annual conference features motivational speakers; students address issues such as deferred action, bilingualism in workshops

ATLANTA, Ga. (Dec. 6, 2012) --- Nearly 1,500 middle and high school students descended on the Emory University campus on Saturday, Dec. 1 for a day full of college-focused workshops, motivational speakers and interactions with college students at the Latin American Association's 13th Annual Latino Youth Leadership Conference. Including parents, teachers and volunteers, close to 2,000 people participated in the youth conference.

From 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., students ages 11 to 17 filled the Decatur campus with their energy. Activities kicked off with music by DJ Carlitos and hip-hop trio RMBR, dances and motivational speakers addressing packed bleachers at Emory's WoodPEC. After that, a rainbow of students in colored T-shirts -- sixth-graders in turquoise; seventh-graders in purple; eighth-graders in green; ninth-graders in gold; tenth-graders in silver; eleventh-graders in blue; and twelfth-graders in white --- dispersed all over campus, from the Robert W. Woodruff Library for a tour to the Michael C. Carlos Museum for a visit of its "For I Am the Black Jaguar" ancient American art exhibit and a stop at the College and Career Fair. AT&T was the conference's presenting sponsor.

Students also attended grade-appropriate workshops that delved into topics such as science degrees and careers, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals immigration relief and bilingualism. Middle and high school students spent the day in small groups led by college students who served as guides and mentors.

"It's important that you make it," said motivational speaker Consuelo Kickbusch in a bilingual address at the opening ceremony, energizing the audience. "Where there's a will, there's a way."

Kickbusch, who told her story of growing up along the border in Laredo, Texas, and going on to become the highest ranking Latina in the combat support field of the U.S. Army, encouraged the youth to recognize and understand the sacrifices their parents make for their children to succeed in this country. "I made life so hard for my mom," she said. "You have one job: sit in that classroom."

AT&T Labs research scientist Alicia Abella, who has a Ph.D. in computer science from Columbia University, recounted how she failed one of her qualifying doctoral exams three times before passing the fourth time. After failing for a third time, she said she cried but realized she needed her Ph.D. to get her "dream job" at AT&T.

"Dedicate yourself and find yourself," Abella told the audience in a presentation that opened to the music of will.i.am's "Hall of Fame." "It means hard work, it means sacrifice."

When she did an internship as a college student at AT&T Labs, Abella left knowing she wanted to pursue a Ph.D. "Everybody there had this thing called a Ph.D.," she said. "If I wanted to be there I had to [get one]."

Miriam Tyson, a seventh-grade teacher at Buford Middle School who took 65 students to the conference, said that hearing speakers talk about overcoming obstacles was motivating and inspirational.

“There’s a lot of positive energy. The kids feel loved and believed in,” Tyson said. “Most of them never get the chance to get outside of Buford, so for them to see that there is so much out there and to see other Hispanics being successful and hearing their stories of overcoming life’s difficulties gives them hope and inspiration.”

Her student Victoria Gutierrez, who wants to be a doctor, praised the conference’s energy.

“I like the enthusiasm that they have here,” said the student, who likes reading and language arts. “It’s so big.”

Joshua Martinez, an eighth grader from South Hall Middle School, was the only student from his school and attended the conference with his dad. He got up at 5:30 a.m. to be at the conference. “It’s nice to know that I can make myself a good future,” he said. “There’s many opportunities for Latinos.”

At the “Add It Up and Lab It Up” workshop, sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders were treated to chemistry experiments performed on a stage by Emory undergrads that included freezing objects with liquid nitrogen, burning ethanol and launching a methanol canon.

“Chemistry is a great major,” one of the students performing the experiments told the crowd.

Emory biology professor Alex Escobar, who led the sessions, said it was all about making science interesting and fun for middle schools students. “They are curious about how they can get this career,” he explained. “We are reaching out to students and exposing them to information that can change their lives.”

At the workshop, students were shown a variety of images to learn how the brain works to create depth. “Your brain creates the sensation of motion, depth and color,” Escobar told the crowd.

At a nearby workshop, immigration attorney Lino Rodriguez talked to tenth-graders about Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. He remarked that DACA is nothing new and that it “is not a Dream Act. ... They’re deferring your deportation,” Rodriguez told the students. “It’s very important that you have the right information.”

Seventh-grader Ashley Gutierrez, who wants to be a lawyer, said the conference gave her a chance to learn about how “other people got to where they are now.” “It was pretty awesome,” said the Buford Middle School student.

At the Emory University booth in the College and Career Fair, senior Alexi New said high school students had approached her table to ask about majors such as chemistry, psychology and prelaw.

“We had a lot of tenth-graders who have an idea of what they want to study,” New said. “That’s great that they’re showing an interest so early.”

Volunteer Pablina Lopez, who spent the day mentoring a group of seventh-graders, said that her favorite part was touring the Woodruff Library. Students were in awe at the view from the top floor. “We talked about what it takes to be a college student, about my study habits,” said the Kennesaw State University student and one of dozens of college-student volunteers.

Isabel Perez, the Latin American Association's managing director for academic achievement, said that the conference followed a distinctive student-centered approach with college students acting as mentor-guides and presenters so they could inspire the younger students.

"The Latin American Association brings together families, students, community leaders and the post-secondary sector in a holistic approach to inspire middle and high school students to go on and pursue higher education," she said. "The conference reaffirms the value of education in the Latino community."

At the end of the day, at the closing ceremony, motivational speaker Ernesto Mejia remarked to students that he is his parents' "American dream."

"You have to dream. You have to believe. You have to fight," he told the crowd. "I dream and I hope for you."

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