

A teacher's journey from being a teen parent to supporting teen parents: 2022 New Mexico Teacher of the Year



LAS CRUCES - Lorynn Guerrero was raised within the halls of Mayfield High School.

Before she even began kindergarten, Guerrero could be found playing in the old courtyard at Mayfield where her father taught for the majority of his 36-year career as an educator.

"(My dad) found some old chalkboards, and he brought them home and put them in our closet," Guerrero said. "I would write on the chalkboard, and I would put the numbers and the ABCs, and I would teach my sister."

On Friday, Guerrero was named the New Mexico Teacher of the Year 2022.

Guerrero, 40, said she was shocked even finding out she was nominated by her principal at the New America School, Margarita Leza Porter — much less when she was named as a finalist and then notified that she was the Teacher of the Year. Leza Porter recognized Guerrero's strengths in her classroom.

The New America School is a small charter high school that serves about 200 students with a focus on supporting new immigrants, English language learners and academically underserved students.

Leza Porter said when she moved Guerrero to instruct ninth-grade English, she saw a 14 percent increase in proficiency in a single year.

"We do a lot of writing, but I like to incorporate reading and writing activities. We do crafts that go with the art project, a lot of research," Guerrero said. "The different things that I can do with them, I want to do. Because that's kind of how I learn. I don't want to just lecture the students, I want them to retain the information.

"I want to make it fun and educational for the students."

Although Guerrero has been teaching English Language Arts at the New America School full-time for five years, she has a long history of teaching in Doña Ana County.

The rise of an educator

Guerrero was born and raised in Las Cruces. During her junior year at Las

Cruces High School, she found out she was pregnant, which led to her transferring to San Andres High — now Rio Grande Preparatory Institute — to finish her studies while balancing her son on the way.

Guerrero said she was able to graduate earlier than expected, earning her degree in November 1998. She then had her son, Jalen, in December 1998.

Guerrero went on to graduate from New Mexico State University in 2005, but struggled to find a permanent position after college.



She substituted in Las Cruces Public Schools for a few months before being offered a permanent substitute position in Hatch Valley Public Schools, where she taught and coached soccer at Hatch Valley middle and high school until 2011.

Guerrero returned to Las Cruces, after six years of commuting daily to Hatch, landing a job teaching English at Oñate High School — now Organ Mountain High.

Guerrero found out about New America School through a fellow teacher and decided to teach night classes part-time for two years before fully transitioning to the charter school in 2017. Although it was a hard decision to leave OMHS, she said the students and the school's mission spoke to her.

"We used to be able to service adults 18 and over, regardless of age, who

wanted to get a high school diploma," Guerrero said. "I had a couple students in my classes that were older — like in their 60s. For them to come into my class and listen to my teaching techniques and follow along with me — I enjoyed working with the adults at night.

"The classroom dynamic was smaller ... I really enjoyed working with the night students, so I wanted to work with the daytime students as well."

After a few years of successful teaching, Guerrero noticed a need for support of teen parents at the New America School.

When she was a student at San Andres, she was aided by the GRADS Program, which stands for Graduation Reality and Dual-role Skills. GRADS is an in-school program for expectant and parenting teens in New Mexico Schools.

In 2020, Guerrero took the initiative to start a GRADS Program at the New America School.

The GRADS Program at the New America Schools offers special courses for students who are expecting or have children to prepare them for the real world. It also supports the parents of the teens, which is the "dual-role" inclusion.

The New America School also has a room dedicated to a daycare for children of students that was officially opened in August 2021. The remodeling of the regular classroom to a daycare facility took about almost a year. Currently, there are five babies that the school supports.

Guerrero said the school is a network of support for the students and their children.

"When the parents come back to school, their children are with them at the

school," Guerrero said. "The mothers have the ability to nurse their children, and then go right back to class. That way, everybody's all in one area, you're not having to drive back and forth to a childcare center.

"Regardless of their age, we just want to support them, and educate."

Teacher of the Year: What it means

Guerrero said that her family, her two parents, Raul and Cecilia, and her two sons, 22-year-old Jalen and 17-year-old Jarod, are so proud of her for being selected Teacher of the Year.

Raul, Cecilia and Jarod were present at the announcement ceremony at the New America School on Friday afternoon. Jalen called in via Zoom and waved to his mom as she accepted her award.

Cecilia held back tears while describing how proud she was of her daughter.

"I can't even talk," Cecilia said. "As a mother, she's already succeeded."

Raul said he can't take the credit for his daughter's success as a teacher, saying "when she sets her mind a certain way, that's it."

He recalled Guerrero first saying she wanted to be a teacher when she was just in third grade after he and Cecilia raised Guerrero to be excited to learn and especially read.

Even now, Guerrero is still a student herself. She is currently earning her master's degree at Eastern New Mexico University. She is set to graduate in May.

Guerrero's fellow teachers also have been supportive of her being Teacher of the Year, as have her students.

"This whole week, I've been getting congratulations for being a finalist," Guerrero said before the announcement was made on Friday. "I've been getting fist bumps. The students, I don't have them in my classes anymore, but they still stand up to me and tell me congratulations and how proud they are. That makes me feel good."

At Friday's ceremony, many state and community leaders in education attended including New Mexico Public Education Department secretary-designate Kurt Steinhaus, who introduced Guerrero.

To the dozens of students who gathered in the cafeteria for the event, Steinhaus said he hopes Guerrero's accomplishment helps inspire some of them to become educators themselves.

When Guerrero walked through the halls, student after student congratulated her on being Teacher of the Year.

Guerrero said she is excited to be able to represent New Mexico and Las Cruces as Teacher of the Year.

"I want to represent the teachers and the students and be a positive voice for them," Guerrero said. "This is my hometown and I'm so happy because I have so many ties to the community."

As Teacher of the Year, Guerrero will represent New Mexico in Washington, D.C., for the National Teacher of the Year competition.

After being named Teacher of the Year, an educator is offered a year of rigorous learning experiences, with opportunities to explore educator advocacy, education policy and leadership.

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