

It all adds up

Math-teaching couple gives back by mentoring, shaping young minds

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“Math camp” isn’t the most romantic place to meet, but that’s where Rey and Luvia Rivera’s courtship began.

Rey had just completed his junior year at the University of Texas at Austin and Luvia was wrapping up her sophomore year at Arizona State. Both had applied for and were accepted to the Summer Math Institute, a program at the University of California in Berkeley designed to increase the number of minority students pursuing degrees in mathematics.

Their lives and careers were enriched by that meeting. And so, too, have the lives of many Latino students been positively influenced.

Meet Rey and Luvia Rivera, professors of mathematics at Estrella Mountain Community College.

They not only share a passion for each other – they have been married for 16 years and have two children – they also share a passion for mentoring students interested in

pursuing an education in math and science.

“We love our job,” says Luvia, 37, a native of Zacatecas, Mexico. “Our goal is to continually better ourselves as educators so that we can share our knowledge of mathematics with our students and then introduce them to opportunities in the fields of math and science.”

Rey, 38, a native of San Antonio, Texas, earned his bachelor’s degree from the University of Texas in mathematics and his master’s degree from Purdue University also in mathematics. He holds a doctorate of education from ASU in Higher and Post Secondary Education. He has taught math at Estrella Mountain for 12 years.

Luvia, a math professor at Estrella Mountain for 6 years, earned her bachelor’s degree in math at Texas and her master’s degree in math education from Purdue.

But it’s what the Riveras do outside the classroom that is perhaps the most important.

The Riveras have helped Estrella Mountain Community College secure National Science Foundation grants to help increase the number of minority students pursuing degrees in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM). The grants provide scholarship money for students as well as opportunities for students to investigate careers in the STEM areas.

To date, the Riveras have helped secure more than \$1.5 million in grants. They also donate to the Maricopa Foundation Scholarship Fund from their own personal finances.

And they have helped students land internships at such places as Yale University School of Medicine, Sandia National Labs in New Mexico and the Department of Energy.

Why such a devotion to making a difference?

“Seeing a Latino in front of the classroom is very motivating (to minority students),” Rey says. “That’s the grand plan. The impact we have in the classroom is what’s key. We average about 120 students per semester in our calculus classes. I don’t think I could ever leave the classroom and lose that contact and impact.

“Our purpose was to engage students to get into science and math and provide students a mentor. Our job is to make sure they take core courses and find the right resources. Quite a bit (of students) transfer from here to the ASU School of engineering. These are also first generation college students.”

The payoff, the Riveras say, is getting letters from students thanking them and indicating that they have graduated or are working at places they never dreamed of.

“It’s enough (of a reward) for us to hear the success stories,” Rey says.

When asked what aspect of her work she enjoys, Luvia says: “Mentoring.”

When she was a junior in high school, Luvia attended the Math Science Honors Program at ASU. She attended ASU for three years before finishing at Texas.

The experience?

“Once I got to ASU my freshman year I knew what to do,” she says. “It was one big family. And it provided mentors and tutors. I knew the summer program experience had worked. We would not be where we are today without the great mentors that paved the way for us. People like Dr. Joaquin Bustoz from ASU. I wanted to replicate the Math Science Honors Program at Estrella Mountain.”

The payoff?

“Building relationships with high school students,” Luvia says. “I really enjoy that. And to see Latinos in the math program, especially women.”

The Riveras also work with high school students at Estrella Mountain through the ACE Program. Students spend five weeks on campus taking college level math or science courses while still in high school. The purpose

of the program is to increase students' abilities in these fields and to encourage them to pursue degrees in the STEM areas.