

Sequoia Scholars Program Expands Horizons

By Bill Shilstone

When Sylvia Gomez came to Redwood City from Mexico 17 years ago, she was afraid to go to school because she spoke only Spanish. Now she has a medical assistant certificate from Cañada College and is studying to be a registered nurse.

Alejandro Avendano dropped out of Sequoia High School when his girlfriend got pregnant. Today, he's attending College of San Mateo and is on his way to becoming a police officer.

Marta Marcos escaped horrific conditions in El Salvador and is now working as an assistant pre-school teacher.

All three are products of the Sequoia Adult School Scholars, a nonprofit program that provides money and tutoring to help adult school English as a Second Language students make the transition to college.

"This is a deserving but underserved population," said Elizabeth Weal, who founded SASS in 2009 after teaching ESL in June. She and her two daughters fled from El Salvador for 10 years. "Every day I left with a good feeling but thinking we can be doing more." The program has grown from three students and five tutors to 190 students and 50 tutors. Encouragement and financial support for continuing studies, Weal said, allows working adults, most with children, to go from low-wage to middle-wage jobs -- to start their own cleaning service instead of working for one, or to advance from dishwasher to sous-chef.

"I have visited a number of community colleges and adult schools, and no one has a foundation that provides the kind of support to adult learners that SASS does," said Professor Jenny Castello, ESL Department coordinator at Cañada. "The financial help is critically important to most of our students, and the SASS tutors are more

flexible than the college's about when and where they can meet our students."

Both Weal and Castello say just knowing that somebody is helping motivates students to persist. "It builds self-esteem and an I-can-do-this attitude that this population doesn't always have," Weal said.

The program is supported by donations from individuals (70 percent), foundations and corporations. It provides donated laptops, which makes studying easier for working adults than smart phones or trips to the library. All the students -- 95 percent of them immigrants and most of whom live in North Fair Oaks or East Palo Alto -- are low-income and eligible for exemption from fees.

The average scholarship is \$1,000, not a lot of money, but, Weal said, "A bus pass can make all the difference." It did for Marta Marcos, she said in telling her story at this year's celebration and fund-raiser in June. She and her two daughters fled from El Salvador and were granted asylum after their lives were put in danger when her husband refused a gang's order to steal money from the bakery where he worked. "The police said they could not protect us," Marcos said. When she got to Redwood City, she worked in a restaurant, studied English at the adult school, and found her niche helping teachers at Fair Oaks, her daughters' school. "SASS paid for my books and bus pass," she said, "and learning English changed my life." Her goal is to become a teacher.

Avendano, Marcos' fellow speaker, said the arrival of his son turned on the light for him. "When I saw him, I knew I had to change," he said. "I want him to live in a house with his own room (something Avendano never did). I realized going back to school was the only way." He graduated



Marta Marcos, her husband, Mario, and daughters Lilian and Violeta fled from the threat of violence in El Salvador.



Alejandro Avendano says his wife, Mineroa, and son, Elias, were inspirations for him as he turned things around in his life.

from Sequoia at age 23, then studied with SASS tutor Susan Speicher. "I couldn't afford college without you (SASS)," he said. "Thank you for believing in me."

Speicher said Avendano worked diligently to pass his courses at Cañada. "It's more rewarding for me than for him," she said. "Somehow it isn't fair that I had opportunities -- all the things we take for granted -- and he didn't." **C**