

# THE TIMES

## Thanks in part to Leadership Academy, students on the right path

**An added bonus: School captures first-place trophy at Economics Symposium**

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*(Photo: Ernest A. Brown/The Times) Toby Shepherd, executive director of Nowell Leadership Academy, left, and student Jorayma Borges, 16, proudly display the first-place trophy the school won at the Global Economics Symposium, held at the John F. Kennedy Library in Dorchester on Jan. 27. The team competed with 15 Massachusetts and Rhode Island high schools, surpassing East Greenwich High School, which placed second, for the top spot.*

CENTRAL FALLS — Sixteen-year-old Jorayma Borges overcame tremendous adversity as a teen mother, and she's hoping to impart some of her knowledge on her peers who may find themselves in a similar situation.

A student at the Sheila C. “Skip” Nowell Leadership Academy, Borges in an interview with The Times on Thursday said that she “started off rough” as a student at Central Falls High School, saying that attending school there “wasn't going the best way for me.” Her cousin attended Nowell Academy and she praised it as a great school but Borges said she was “hard-headed and stubborn” and wasn't thinking straight until she realized she was pregnant.

Once she came to the realization that she had a child on the way, Borges said she understood that “it wasn't about me,” and gave Nowell a try.

Sponsored by the YWCA Rhode Island, Nowell Academy is a public charter school founded to serve pregnant and parenting young adults. With campuses in Central Falls and Providence serving students from across Rhode Island, the average classroom has a student-to-teacher ratio of 10-to-1, which school officials say offers the opportunity for teachers to truly get to know their students and care about their well being.

Borges said that while she did slack a bit during her earliest days at Nowell, she said that “something just told me one day you could do it.” Now a mother with a 2-year-old son, Devonte, Borges says that the school has helped her make great strides in and out of school.

“I always kept that mindset. I could still do it. We have such supportive teachers, they try to motivate me ... Since the beginning of this year, I've been here every day, I try my best here,” she said.

“The care and support you get and need, they make you feel welcome,” Borges said of the staff at Nowell. “You feel accepted, you feel wanted, it makes you feel motivated to come to school. I know there's a lot of girls like me, it makes me feel good to be here.”

Nowell Academy has 160 students and was founded in 2013 and since its inception, has graduated 150 students. Most of the students are between 15 and 20 years old who started high school elsewhere but got “a bit off track,” and Nowell offers them the chance to graduate with a high school diploma, Executive Director Toby Shepherd said.

Borges was part of a team of six students from Pawtucket and Central Falls who, last month, won first prize at the annual Global Economic Symposium held at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library. Hundreds of middle- and highschool students from across New England presented research and proposed solutions to global economic challenges.

Borges said that the focus of their presentation was on child sex trafficking, an issue that she has heard stories from friends about enduring similar situations. She said that by talking about the issue, it brings to people's attention that child sex trafficking is a daily problem concerning the entire world.

The team from Nowell that came back to Central Falls as first-place winners included Emily Medeiros, Tiffany Medeiros, Arianna Gutierrez, Priscilla Domenech, Jorayma Borges, and Mariangelis Gonzalez.

“My goal was to get people to realize that (child sex trafficking) is an issue in the United States. We worked on a board that shows the average rate here in Rhode Island and other countries to see that the rates are really high ... It’s not safe for children, it damages people’s futures, it shows that some may not trust or love again, and that’s not right. It messes with their emotions,” Borges said.

Their presentation also included a board that displayed, in three tiers, where child sex trafficking is most problematic, most notably Malaysia, versus where it is less common, such as Sweden.

“I know girls that go through it, I didn’t think it was that much of an issue in the United States, I thought it was something that every other kid goes through,” she said. “When I started researching and seeing all this information, it was shocking to me, seeing the links I’ve seen made me want to cry. I wouldn’t want anyone to go through that.”

Science education teacher Rosemary Miner said that it was “so very rewarding” for the students to come back from Boston with the first prize.

“This was a huge undertaking ... that required students to pick a global problem, research it, locate a national and international problem, tackle it and think of ways in which we can tackle it as local communities and national and global communities,” Miner said.

As awards were being presented at the symposium, Borges said she wasn't exactly brimming with confidence.

“I didn’t feel I did that good of a job until they said first place,” she said. “I didn’t think we were going to win. Everyone was disappointed but the judges thought different. We jumped up and hugged each other.”

Miner added: “Several of these groups were seasoned at this presentation and had done other events. We had not but we had confidence, we knew we were prepared, once we got there and saw the trophies, we wanted the first prize trophy. These young women found they have a voice and a solution and contributions to make, they can compete at the highest level.”

“I think we were different on that bus coming home than on that bus going there ... A lot of girls broke their stage fright, they got on stage and did it, those are the big victories but we wanted the trophy,” Miner said. “It’s just incredible, I’ve never been more proud of a group of young women than that.”