

Giving kids the biz

Lucía Cárdenas shows teens how to succeed in work & life

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By Colin O'Brien

"I don't have kids yet," says Lucía Cárdenas of Cristo Rey High School in East Harlem with a bright smile. "But I have some 150 students, and at some point, I will have 400. That's more than enough for right now."

Cárdenas, 34, of Jersey City, is the assistant director of the school's Corporate Work Study Program and a mentor to those 150 students. All of them are freshmen or sophomores at Cristo Rey, which opened in the fall of 2004 on 106th St. between Park and Lexington Aves. The school's mission is to provide an affordable, Catholic, college-prep-quality education to young men and women who would not be able to afford a traditional private high school education.



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Lucía Cárdenas

Through its work-study program, Cristo Rey's students, many of whom are Harlem and Bronx residents, learn valuable business skills in class. They then apply those skills by working one day a week at some of New York's top companies and nonprofits, including Goldman Sachs, Merrill Lynch and the City of New York. The money they earn from working covers much of the cost of tuition, so the amount students pay to attend Cristo Rey is less than \$2,000 a year.

In 2000, Cárdenas moved to New York City from Mexico City, where she was born and where she received a degree in education. She completed a master's degree in anthropology at The New School. After attaining permanent-resident status, she was hired for the position at Cristo Rey, which she describes as a dream job.

"I can combine my interest in education with a bit of anthropology," she says. "I'm learning not only about the culture of my students, but also the business culture" - a change from the academic world to which she's accustomed, she says.

Her duties include participating in the school's rigorous admissions interviews of prospective students, as well as acting as an adviser to current students who have personal or school-related questions. She participates in giving the school's pre-class morning talks, which set out a theme or idea students can apply in both the classroom and on the job. She then accompanies the students to and from

their jobs each day.

Cárdenas also helps organize the program's three-week summer Business Boot Camp, during which incoming students learn basic business and clerical skills.

The sessions run all day, with half the day dedicated to business and work skills, and the other half spent with faculty members who familiarize the students with the school's academics. At the end of boot camp, students find out which company they will work for - based on their skills, interests and the needs of participating employers.

"The Business Boot Camp in itself is a challenge for everybody, because that is the time when they have to prove themselves after being interviewed," Cárdenas says. "That is the time they have to show what they're made of."

The school requires all students to learn Spanish, so in addition to showing them the ways of the working world, Cárdenas is there to show them the advantages of knowing a second language. Although many Cristo Rey students speak Spanish with their families, they often do not know how to read or write it.

"Because I'm bilingual, I hope I'm a role model," she says. "My English is always in process, so I'm learning English as I go, just as the students are learning Spanish as they go. I'm there to show how useful Spanish can be, not only to talk with their families, but also for business."

Friendly and personable, yet professional, Cárdenas has earned the respect of faculty and students alike through her commitment to the well-being and success of the students and the school.

"If you're having problems with homework, she's always there to help you with it," says Alex Wright, 15, of Harlem. "Also, what she talks about in the morning talk makes me think about how my life is going, and I can compare that to what she's talking about. She's available to show us how to correct mistakes and to do things better."

"One thing I don't do, however, is give answers," Cárdenas interjects with a laugh. "I'm very strict. I have very high expectations, and I don't like complacency. I don't think that helps them."

Those high expectations please Cristo Rey's president, the Rev. Joseph Parkes. "Ms. Cárdenas brings her pleasing smile and warm personality to Cristo Rey every day, without fail," he says. "She patiently but firmly teaches our students how to succeed in business by really trying. And she backs up that teaching by an incredible work ethic, which inspires all of us, students and faculty alike, to do our best."

Part of that work ethic entails giving extra individual attention to some students she calls her "personal projects."

"I have a student who's very, very shy," Cárdenas says. "Since the moment I interviewed her ... I made her my personal project. She's not out of her shell yet, but we're trying."

"In a conversation with her, I learned that she liked reading suspense books. I bought a book and introduced her to Sherlock Holmes. I'm also talking to her about how to be more conversational at work and in life."

The students exhibit their development not only to Cárdenas and the other staff and faculty of Cristo Rey, but also to their supervisors at work. Employers review their student employees on a quarterly basis, and the vast majority do very well. A bulletin board in one of the school's hallways displays letters from companies praising their student employees.

"Recently, 97% of our students received either a 'good' or an 'outstanding' on their performance evaluations," Cárdenas says. "These are teenagers, and yet sometimes, in the companies, they have mistaken our students for regular employees, because of how they look and because of the way they perform. It is so inspiring for everyone."

One student's experience of workplace success particularly touched Cárdenas.

"His supervisor couldn't go to college for some reason," she says, "but he was hoping that when this student graduated from college, [he] could work for [the student]."

It is moments like those that she finds most rewarding, although her motivation and enjoyment in her work run deeper.

"I try to focus on being a good human being: honorable, responsible, caring, interested in the lives of others, always ready to learn from the ones who don't think like me, teaching by example more than just through words, and, most of all, I try to be useful to my community in any way I can."