

CENTRAL

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CAROL MENDEZ '09

TEACHER OF THE YEAR

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THE UNBROKEN CIRCLE

FROM FIELDWORKER TO
TWO-TIME-AWARD-WINNING
FIFTH-GRADE MATH TEACHER,
CAROL MENDEZ '09 EMBODIES
THE AMERICAN DREAM.

BY DAN WEEKS
Photos: Dan Weeks



Carol Mendez '09 grew up picking produce in rural Cambridge, Iowa, alongside her immigrant parents Martha and Miguel. “Things do not have to be this way if you go to school and work hard,” they told her.

“It was said so often that I came to believe it long before high school. Despite the lack of their own education, they believed so deeply in ours and they were right,” says Mendez, a fifth-grade math teacher at St. Louis’ KIPP Triumph Academy, a free charter school embedded in the city’s public-school system.

Last year, Mendez received both the William T. Kemper Excellence in Teaching Award and the 2017 Missouri Charter Public Schools Teacher of the Year award for her work in ensuring that her inner-city students also have a path to college.

“This was only possible because of a

dream my family had,” Mendez says. “Their hard work and dedication set me up with an example of what I was meant to do.”

AN EXAMPLE, NOT A ROADMAP

Mendez was the first in her family to graduate high school, much less college. (Her younger brother, Miguel Mendez '10, followed her to Central.) How she got to Central is a study in parental sacrifice, personal ambition and the willingness of two generations of her family to make huge leaps of faith and figure out the details later.

“My parents migrated from Mexico and first settled in South Texas, 10 minutes across the border. We came north every year to do fieldwork in Iowa—detasselling, pollinating, strawberry picking. My whole family—grandparents, aunts, uncles,

cousins—were offered full-time jobs in Iowa. My parents were the only ones to make the leap. The schools were so much better here, and my mother knew if she could give us a good education it would open opportunities for us,” Mendez says.

“When my mother worked full-time she left sticky notes all over the house that told each of us what to do when we got home from school: clean the house, cook supper, do our homework,” Mendez adds. “They all had to be crossed off before she got home from work. She had the vision, the organization. At times my father worked three jobs so we could afford a place to live. If we complained about our chores, he’d sit with us and gently explain: ‘We need your help to make this work. We’re doing this for you.’ He was always understanding and loving.”

I ALWAYS FELT EQUAL

“When we got here, my family [Carol also has an older sister, Crystal] knew 25 words of English between us. I was 10. The school in Cambridge had no other immigrant kids. There were no English Language Learning teachers,” she says. “But I knew I could learn just as much as the other kids if I just knew the language.”

“My brother and I made a plan: we’d teach each other English. Anything we saw—newspapers, cereal boxes, the label on the back of the TV—we’d work to figure it out together. Eventually the school hired a bilingual college student and he’d come work with us. By the time we entered the next grade, we were virtually bilingual,” Mendez continues.

“We were eager to learn, eager to make friends. I knew all along: I look different, I eat different foods, my parents can’t afford some of the extracurricular activities other kids’ could and we didn’t have the nicest shoes,” she says. “But I knew I was just the same as everyone else. I always felt equal. Many students were very friendly. My best friend introduced herself to me by saying: ‘Want to play?’ She just saw a new face. Others were borderline racist. But really, once we learned the language, it wasn’t that hard.”

WELCOME TO CENTRAL

“I knew I wanted to go to a small college, and in the fall of my senior year, my parents drove me to Central. Pella was so calming, so beautiful. As we walked into the admissions office, they had ‘Welcome, Carol Mendez!’ on the screen. The ability

to get a great education in a compact space just an hour from home seemed ideal. When I got in, my first thought was, ‘Wow, those [tuition] numbers are big! But I’m going to find a way to pay this off,’” Mendez says.

Student Support Services helped her with some scholarships.

“It is a big deal in my culture for a Latina to leave home at age 17. It was hard. I remember sitting in the back seat of the car thinking, ‘I can’t cry in front of my parents.’”

Mendez tells her story sitting in her St. Louis classroom after she’s walked her students to the school bus. “They all know who I am and where I come from,” she says. “All are low-income. They know we share similar upbringings.”

In college, Mendez felt called to a career that would allow her to share her story “to help those in need.” She thought of teaching but loved science. At one point, she planned to study medicine. An organic chemistry course persuaded her otherwise.

Starting her junior year, she focused on her double major in education and Spanish and spent a semester at Central’s Mérida, Mexico, program. “I knew the language, but I wanted to know the literature, the history, the culture,” she says. The semester in Mexico “changed my life. My family was from Mexico, but a much different area. I realized there was so much out there in the world to learn.” Mendez has since spent a summer vacation in Europe, soaking up the history and culture, and plans to continue to travel.

The most transformative thing about Central? “Feeling welcomed in a very affluent environment,” Mendez says. “I missed one class meeting and my professor called my dorm room to make sure I was OK. I knew my profs by their first names. They pushed me, but in a different way, because they knew me.”

Commencement, she says, was “probably the most emotional day in my parents’ life. I’d made their dream come true.”

IT TAKES A FAMILY

Now to make her own dream come true: teaching other kids from diverse, marginalized communities that they, too, can make it to college. She signed up for Teach for America and ended up in inner-city St. Louis.

Her Central education and her Teach for America training was invaluable. But what has made her an outstanding success as a teacher is the example of her mother, father and grandfather.

Paula Lee, a Central education advisory council member, told her that she had the makings of a teacher but warned her to focus on mastering classroom management “or they’re going to eat you alive in St. Louis.”

“My mother was the visionary and the disciplinarian. My dad was the loving, caring father. I realized if I could mesh both of their personalities I can give my students what they need,” Mendez says. “I’m not going to lower my standards for them, no matter what their life circumstances—and some of them have it pretty rough. But I show them I love them, too. I channel both my parents every day. People tell me ‘You have a very strong demeanor, but you’re very easy-going.’”

Breaking with school practice, she made home visits to every one of her students. “At the first school at which I taught, my supervisors told me not to go. They said it wasn’t safe. No one would come with me. But I knew I needed parents’ buy-in. I told them, ‘I will change your child’s life, but you need to support me.’ I actually had them sign a contract. The parents were shocked, but not one was offended. Some thanked me. Some cried. One said, ‘You’re the only teacher who has spoken to me in Spanish.’ I learned where each of my kids came from and what they were dealing with,” she says.

Her choice of teaching math came directly from her grandfather. “Working in the fields, we had to do a lot of math. He made it fun. We’d be picking strawberries,



Photo: Courtesy of Carol Mendez

and he'd say, 'We get paid this much per pound. How many pounds can you pick per hour? How many hours will you work today? How much money will you make?' He taught us shortcuts for multiplying. He made our work a story problem. He made math seem so logical and natural to me. The way my grandfather taught me math in the field is the way I teach my students. I love teaching fifth grade math because it's the math you'll use every day, all your life," she adds.

DESTINATION: EXCELLENCE

Mendez doesn't talk much about her teaching awards. They're not on display in her classroom. Instead, she has a picture of her family flanking her at her Central graduation, radiating pride. "I could win 10 awards and not feel that I have lived up to their sacrifices," she says.

She also has pictures of her students on her classroom walls—studying, playing, on field trips. And, per KIPP practice, her room has a Central College banner over the door: Each homeroom class takes on the name and identity of the college from which the teacher graduated. It's a tangible connection to the world of higher education to which the students aspire.

Mendez is slight, energetic, intense: a triathlete in the virtually non-existent spare time that wedges itself into her 70-80 hour weeks. That time includes lesson



preparation. "We have no textbooks, she says. "Everything I put in front of my students I've created." It also encompasses before-and-after school tutoring, participating in school and student events, school governance, mentoring colleagues as a team leader and just being a resource in the lives of her students.

One parent asked if Mendez would take her son to Mexico to see his grandparents. The parent couldn't go because of work and family obligations. Mendez went in her stead. The student is now attending a prestigious private boarding school in Philadelphia. Mendez and his mother took him there and Mendez helped him move in.

In her Excellence in Teaching Award nomination, Triumph Academy's principal, Elizabeth Valerio, wrote: "Carol's classroom is without a doubt the happiest place at

KIPP Triumph. You could sit for hours in there. If I'm having a rough day, sometimes I do. Kids are on task, working hard, all the time. Carol is constantly aggressively monitoring scholar work no matter what kids are working on. The room is always positive. Kids LOVE seeing Ms. Mendez and love going to math. She tracks data effectively and efficiently, and kids are super invested in seeing their results. ... Carol's scholars know that every problem matters and that she's going to stay with them until they get it."

The result: Mendez, "doubled, tripled and quadrupled her [students] proficiency scores for fifth grade math. The learning in her classroom this year increased by over 500 percent by the end of the school year," wrote Valerio. It was an astonishing achievement.

"She's smart, she's the best math teacher ever and she always respects how you feel, even when you're feeling sad or mad," says Aceland, one of Mendez's scholars. "She helps the students get more knowledge and education for math and helps them get their grades higher. She tells students how to respect each other."

"She's fun, she listens, she gives you lots of chances," adds another student, Sam. "She doesn't get mad at you right away. She's nice, she takes us on field trips. She will pick us up and surprise us, but our parents will know. She's a good teacher."



Photo: Courtesy of KIPP



KNOWLEDGE IS POWER.

"THE WAY MY GRANDFATHER TAUGHT ME MATH IN THE FIELD IS THE WAY I TEACH MY STUDENTS."

— CAROL MENDEZ '09

WHAT NEXT?

Mendez knows her workload isn't sustainable. She's aware of the possibility of burnout. "This is my graduate school," she says. "It's the hardest thing I've ever done. Harder than organic chemistry."

But it's getting easier. For her four-week summer vacation, she typically sleeps for two weeks. Then she reflects and plans.

When asked what she'd like to do next, her snappy brown eyes lose focus a bit.

"I'd like to take my students to Central. They've never been out of the city, much less out of the state," she says.

She gazes out her classroom window, switches to present tense, as though she's already on the trip. "We arrive in Pella. I'm asking them: Why are there tulips?"

Why is there a windmill here? Because people came here from a different place to make a new life and they are still proud of that—so proud that the town looks like a little town in Holland," she muses. "You can be just as proud of where you come from and who you are. This is where you make your dreams come true."



LEARN MORE ABOUT

Central's education major and teacher preparation:

Elementary: www.central.edu/elementary-education

Secondary: www.central.edu/secondary-education

Teach for America: teachforamerica.org

KIPP St. Louis, Triumph Academy's nonprofit affiliate: kippstl.org

Sponsoring a Journey Scholarship to help someone like Carol Mendez '09: central.edu/alumni/journey-scholarship-fund/