

# East Aurora School District's Parent University offers message about possibilities: 'Our children need to know we see their potential'

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East Aurora School District/HANDOUT

Susana Rivera-Mills shared her inspiring story about migrating from El Salvador and the journey that led her to become the first Latina to head Aurora University with families at East Aurora School District 131's fourth annual Parent University last weekend.

Rivera-Mills remembers her parents telling her and her siblings to pack lightly for their trip to the U.S. The family was escaping a civil war in their home country.

She had to leave all her toys behind, except for one. The family thought they would be staying for a short time with relatives in San Francisco, just until things got better in El Salvador. She was just 12 years old, and didn't speak English when she started school in this country.

Rivera-Mills never thought about going to college as she and her family adjusted to their new home.

"In my life, I was blessed because I always had people who helped me," she said in Spanish.

It was a teacher who encouraged her to go to college. Her teacher "saw my potential before I could," said Rivera-Mills, the keynote speaker at the Parent University event last Saturday. The teacher encouraged her and talked about career options, including working for NASA since she was good at math and science.

"Very soon, she had me dreaming about all these things that I never imagined," said Rivera-Mills.

She eventually chose a career in teaching and received her bachelor's degree in Spanish and a master's degree in Spanish Linguistics from the University of Iowa. Her doctorate in Romance languages is from the University of New Mexico.

Rivera-Mills told parents at the event that their children have potential, "a potential they don't see but we do," she said. "Our children need to know we see their potential."

East Aurora School District 131 Superintendent Jennifer Norrell said Rivera-Mills "understands the transformative nature of education."



Susana Rivera-Mills, center, president of Aurora University, was the keynote speaker for this year's Parent University event presented by East Aurora School District last Saturday. East Aurora School District 131 Superintendent Jennifer Norrell, left, and Dan Barreiro, vice president of the district's school board, share a moment with Rivera-Mills during the event.

District 131 students should all feel they can reach their potential, whether it's a college education or job training, she said.

This year's Parent University featured sessions on topics like preparing students for college or careers, keeping children safe from drugs and human trafficking, understanding the special needs education system, advocating for your child and their children, and mental health.

The sessions, done in English and Spanish, drew families like Ivan and Sarai Favela, who have a 7-year-old son in a District 131 school.

The couple was interested in learning about mental health and children.

"I think it's important to protect them from things like bullying. There's so much bullying right now," Ivan Favela said in Spanish.

He said there's also a lot of danger on social media.

"There are things they don't need to see or shouldn't see," Sarai Favela said. "There are so many things influencing children."

"We need to be more informed to know what to be aware of," Ivan Favela said.

He is a 2008 graduate of East Aurora High School, where the Parent University event was held, and he said he was glad there's so much information for families who don't speak English. His mom didn't speak English when he was in school and found the education system intimidating, like a lot of Hispanic parents often felt, he said.

It's important for Hispanic parents to feel part of a child's education, he said.

"Before, there wasn't information available in Spanish, and you would see parents feeling scared and isolated," he said.

*Gloria Casas is a freelance reporter for The Beacon-News.*