



Guadalupe Center's Tutor Corps Alumni Gather at Inaugural BBQ

By Dawn Montecalvo

When we first met Ana Abarca, she was an ambitious teenager with aspirations of becoming just the second member of her family to graduate from college.

Fast forward a decade and Ana has earned a high school diploma, completed a bachelor's degree in secondary mathematics from Florida Gulf Coast University and now is employed by the Collier County School District as a math teacher at Immokalee Middle School.

It's an extraordinary achievement for a young person raised in Immokalee, where only 4.8 percent of adults have earned at least a bachelor's degree, according to the U.S. Census. Nearly half of the community lives in poverty.

Ana's achievement, once a rarity in Immokalee, happens regularly for graduates of Guadalupe Center's Tutor Corps Program. To date, the college preparatory program counts 133 college graduates among its alumni, many of whom have returned to Southwest Florida as educators, engineers, public service workers, health care specialists and other professionals.

Guadalupe Center invited its Tutor Corps alumni back for a festive barbecue on Dec. 8, a family reunion of sorts that reconnected former classmates, friends and Guadalupe Center staffers. Those one-time teenagers with ambition have matured into distinguished young professionals, each appreciative of the opportunities provided by Guadalupe Center.

At the alumni barbecue, Ana credited Guadalupe Center as the inspiration to continue her education and said her program-provided mentors still keep in touch to this day. Her involvement with Tutor Corps is one of the reasons she elected to remain in Immokalee.

"They have given so much that I want to do the same for other students in this community to show them that they can – and will – succeed with the help of others or programs like the Guadalupe Center," Ana said.

Many students in Guadalupe Center's three academic programs – Early Childhood Education, After-school Tutoring & Summer Enrichment, and Tutor Corps – are children of farmworkers and day laborers. Now armed with a college education, Tutor Corps alumni are parlaying their education into a brighter future.

“Tutor Corps is a program that doesn't just help prepare Immokalee students for college or provide them with scholarship dollars,” said Jorge Perez, Tutor Corps college coordinator. “It literally changes their lives. Tutor Corps alumni have broken the cycle of poverty, and federal data show individuals with a bachelor's degree will earn about \$1 million more over their lifetime compared to those with a high school diploma.”

Although Guadalupe Center has programs for children as young as 6 weeks old, Tutor Corps is the pinnacle, offering guidance in college and career readiness, ACT and SAT test prep, mentorships, financial literacy and scholarship assistance, as well as a wage for tutoring younger students.

In addition to the 133 college graduates, another 138 Tutor Corps alumni are still in college completing their degree programs. Their perseverance and commitment to education is an inspiration to the 100-plus Immokalee High School students who are still in the Tutor Corps Program.

Tutor Corps has produced some astounding statistics:

- Over the past 13 years, 100 percent of seniors in the Tutor Corps program have graduated from high school. By comparison, just 39.3 percent of Immokalee residents have a high school diploma.
- More than 92 percent of Tutor Corps alumni have earned college degrees. The National Center for Education Statistics reports the nationwide college completion rate for low-income students is 16 percent.
- Thirteen of last May's 29 Tutor Corps graduates earned four-year, full-ride scholarships. The Tutor Corps Class of 2018 earned a whopping \$2.5 million in college scholarships.

Tutor Corps truly is creating endless opportunities for the students of Immokalee.

About the Author

Dawn Montecalvo is president of Guadalupe Center in Immokalee, a nonprofit organization with a mission of breaking the cycle of poverty through education for the children of Immokalee.