

Leaving a Legacy – Ana Maria Rivera: Teacher, Volunteer, Free Spirit

By Diana Spore, Older Adult Behavioral Health Coalition

Ana Maria Rivera embraces life with a positive, exuberant attitude, has an appealing sense of humor, and is delightful to chat with. She is a dedicated volunteer, a role in which she makes a major contribution to our community. Ana Maria has been and continues to be a teacher. She is passionate about women's rights, and views education as the mechanism for ensuring empowerment among women, for securing jobs that will allow them to continue caring for their children "no matter what happens."

Ana Maria is 79-years-old, and will celebrate her 80th birthday in April. She was born in Puerto Rico, and resides in Ashland. She is single, has two children (Sylvia Serrano, Rafael Serrano), has two grandsons (Andre Serrano, Nicolas Serrano), and had one granddaughter, who is deceased (Kasey Serrano). Ana Maria has a cat, Luna.

She has very happy memories of her childhood despite her family's poverty. She spoke about her father's job as a janitor, and her mother's role as a stay-at-home mom. Ana Maria along with her ten brothers and sisters earned college degrees, have been successful.

Ana Maria received her Associate, Bachelor's, and Master's degrees in Education from the University of Phoenix, Puerto Rico campus. She was a teacher for 25 years in Puerto Rico, and continued teaching in the United States. Teaching has been central to her life throughout her adulthood, starting at the age of 21. She was a counselor at an agency in Florida for about 15 years. Ana Maria worked in a residential care facility for women with children, women who were pregnant, who struggled with drug-addiction-related problems. Her work with children moved toward focusing on drug abuse prevention.

Volunteering has been important to and meaningful for Ana Maria. For example, she helped children learn to read at a local elementary school, worked at a monthly Food Bank, and socialized with a nursing home resident living with Alzheimer's Disease (speaking Spanish). Currently, Ana Maria is a Foster Grandmother in the Head Start Program, housed at the Salvation Army Kroc Center. She feels she "needs" to be in that "little corner of the world" with the children – listening, caring, and teaching.

The Joys of Being a Foster Grandmother

The Foster Grandparent Program has been in existence for over 50 years, is sponsored by the Corporation for Ohio Appalachian Development, and is funded by the Corporation for National and Community Service. By volunteering, seniors develop strong relationships with children through offering companionship, love, mentorship, and helping them to develop learning skills. Seniors benefit in terms of health, social connectedness, and knowing that they are making a difference in children's lives. Loving relationships are forged, as older adults work with children in non-profit educational organizations, such as Head Start. Other types of benefits include a stipend if an income criterion is met, financial assistance with transportation, and on-site meals. (For information,

contact Debbie Taylor, Area IV Coordinator, COAD Foster Grandparent Program at 740-392-6251 or dtaylor@coadinc.org).

Debbie Taylor indicated that “I knew from the minute I met Ana Maria in September of 2012, that she was going to be a wonderful volunteer for the Foster Grandparent Program. She had the experience and the love for children we look for in a new volunteer PLUS she could communicate with the Spanish-speaking children...Our program is all the better with having Ana Maria volunteering.”

While the Head Start Program is independent, Major Billy Francis indicated that it is part of the Salvation Army Kroc Center’s “family.”

Head Start works with children, aged 3-to-5 from low-income families, promoting school readiness and their development from a holistic perspective in a loving and positive educational atmosphere. Services focus on (1) “individualized” learning experiences; (2) health; and (3) family well-being. (For information, contact Donna Swartz, Head Start Program Director, 419-281-8001).

Ana Maria dedicates about 24 hours of her time weekly, teaching children in the Head Start Program one-one-one or one-on-two, and helping them to develop skills and good manners. She enjoys reading to and playing games with the children she mentors.

Donna Swartz noted that Ana Maria also assists staff by serving as a translator since Program enrollment by Spanish-speaking families has transpired. In addition, Ana Maria helps with the developmental screening and enrollment process, assists with parent-teacher conferences. The Program has developed a multi-cultural orientation, providing opportunities for children to become bilingual.

Swartz indicated that “One of the great things about Ana Maria is that she shares her Puerto-Rican heritage with the children and staff. Just recently, one of our little boys came up to Ana Maria and said, “Holo! Does that mean Hi in Spanish? She was so excited! Ana Maria also has such a caring heart; she often has eyes filled with tears as she worries about each child. Ana Maria is always willing to help out where needed. We appreciate and love her.”

Closing Comments

Ana Maria described herself as being a free spirit, strong, funny, decisive, and outspoken. She endeavors to be a good mother, grandmother, and friend. Ana Maria is grateful for her family, good health, and independence. She loves to travel, spend time with family and friends, go shopping, and dine at restaurants. Ana Maria remarked that she’d be remembered as someone who never stopped joking, who never stopped listening and striving to learn.

Diane Cawood, COA, noted that Ana Maria is graced by a “beautiful smile,” “being filled with love for people of all ages.” “She is such a blessing to the children she volunteers with, loving each one as if [he/she] was her own,” and is always ready to “help others when asked.”

Celia Cureton, Catholic Charities, expressed “...she [Ana Maria] is a woman who is full of life, who loves her family and always wants them to succeed... She is a very special woman; she is fun, smart,

easy to talk to, and very caring. She is very dedicated to her role as a grandma at Head Start. She makes sure that the little ones feel loved and that they are very special. At Head Start, she will offer comfort to a little one who is crying....I know that the preschoolers love her as much as she loves them.”

Major Billy Francis noted that along with the children Ana Maria works with, visitors and staff at the Salvation Army Kroc Center are “blessed” by her presence, warmth, and “precious soul.”

When asked about lessons learned during her life, her thoughts about how to life fully, and what words of advice she would share with others, Ana Maria expressed the following. First, in order for women to be independent, take advantage of educational opportunities. Go back to school, complete your education. With a diploma or degree in hand, you’ll be able to find a job and care for your children. Second, appreciate freedom, don’t be afraid to pursue your dreams, be happy and healthy, and enjoy all that life has to offer. Third, accept responsibility and be responsible, do your best and be respectful, but don’t let people step on you.

Ana Maria Rivera’s legacy is one of mentorship/teaching and love. She embraces life as well as aging with joy. Ana Maria has gifted our community by sharing so much of herself through volunteering, by making a difference in the lives of children.

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