

ADVERTISEMENT

Participate in the U.S. Cen



Siria Rivera in her office at Providence Center. Photo: Jensen Toussaint/AL DÍA News.

LEA EN
ESPAÑOL

Siria Rivera: A Leader in Two Towns

Siria Rivera is a strong advocate for both the town she lives and the city she works in.

63
Shares



By Jensen
Toussaint

April 01, 2020

Education is one of the most fundamental and essential components in the development and growth of an individual.

Beyond the traditional setting of a classroom with an instructor giving students their lessons based on the school curriculum, accessibility to further resources and guidance outside the classroom is of equal importance.

As she’s taken alternative paths and persevered throughout her educational and professional journeys, Siria Rivera learned firsthand what that could do for a student.

“The truth is that without the guidance of certain case managers and teachers and without access to supplemental educational resources I would not be where I am today,” said Rivera.

After dropping out of school at the age of 16, Rivera eventually earned her GED and

00:04
/
00:30
LIVE

went on to obtain additional higher education degrees, including a master's in educational leadership.

Rivera's unique journey helped spark a passion for youth development that included a number of professional opportunities across Philadelphia and New Jersey.

Last September, she was hired as the executive director of the Providence Center in the Fairhill section of Philadelphia, which provides programming for children, youth and adults with the mission of educating people to have the power and spirit to transform their lives and community.

However, Rivera's work helping make a positive impact on youth goes far beyond her work at Providence Center and Philadelphia.

Joining the School Board

A resident of Collingswood, New Jersey for about six years, Rivera has remained very active in that community, as well.

A few years ago while working in Camden, she was approached by a friend and former colleague to potentially join the School Board of Education.

"At that time, I didn't know much about the school board... the only thing I knew was that it was transitioning from an all-white, older male board to something different," she reflected.

Back then, she didn't feel she had the expertise, nor the time, to commit to being on a school board. So she kindly declined.

Fast forward to this past summer, and she was again approached - this time by current board members - who sat in conversation with her to provide further details, including the amount of time she'd need to commit, the role she'd have and why she'd be a fit on the board.

"In their conversation, what I heard was that they had already made progress toward changing into a much younger board, a much more diverse board as far as age and gender, but not ethnicity and race," said Rivera, adding there was one African-American woman board member at the time.

As Rivera contemplated the decision of whether or not to run for election onto the board, her focus was clear.

"If I choose to run, I want to know that I can be verbal about things that I care about. I don't want to just be the Latina on the board, I want to actually have a voice," she confirmed.

After receiving the clarity that she would have that opportunity, Rivera decided to run for one of two empty seats.

Her vision, as a younger Hispanic woman, was for her election to the board to serve as motivation for more young people to do the same. In turn, it would also trickle down to influencing hirings, contracting and how things would be run across the district.

Rivera was elected and became the first Latina ever elected onto the Collingswood School Board.

A Shifting Demographic

According to statistics from the U.S. Census in 2019, the Latino population in Collingswood is about 6.7%.

In her time living in Collingswood, Rivera has seen a slow increase in Latino presence and younger individuals moving into the city.



"It's really a progressive town," she said. "It's just a very trendy town, and that brings lot of different types of people."

Rivera would like to see the school board reflect the student population both in the district and the city overall.

In the couple months she has served on the board so far, Rivera says she's proud to see that equity, equality, and diversity has already been an ongoing conversation.

"I'm happy that I am not the only one trying to carry that torch," she said. "I think that means something different when someone of color actually talks about it."

While very early in her term, Rivera hopes her long-term impact on the board will be ensuring that conversations about diversity, equity and inclusion continue happening.

In addition, she wants to bring more representation on the board, as well as among the school faculty and students.

Bringing Change to the District

As the mother of a teenage son who has been a student of the district since the first grade, Rivera often discusses with her son his experiences.

She reflected on the initial weeks after moving to Collingswood from Camden. As a six-year-old, Rivera remembered her son telling her how much safer he felt in that school as opposed to the school in Camden.

That school, which Rivera worked for, was a new School of Choice charter school where many students often moved from one school to another, were dealing with trauma, and had a variety of different needs.

It was a stark contrast to the school and district her son currently part of.

"It's definitely a community culture," Rivera said of the Collingswood School District.

She sees a level of passion, creativity and resourcefulness among the teachers in the district that impresses her.

"As someone with a background in education, I look for those things in my child's teacher - someone who thinks outside the box, someone who may think differently from me," she added.

What's missing, said Rivera, is the reflection of the community in the staff. That lack of representation often results in a lack of communication with families who may speak different language.

As someone who grew up in a household with a mother who didn't feel confident enough in her English language skills to really be proactively involved in her school life, Rivera doesn't want to see other youth and families go through the same.

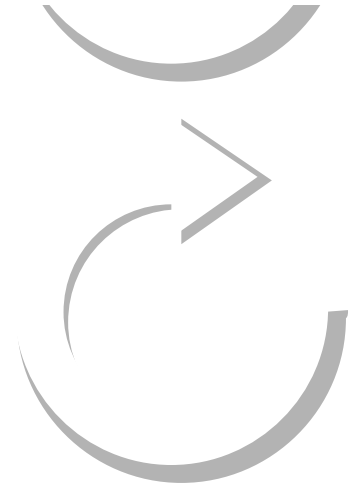
"My perception as a child then, and as an adult now is that that wasn't solely her responsibility," she said. "The School District is there to educate children and in the process should also be there to support parents and helping them educate their children."

She's proud to say that the district is making progress in that endeavor, making communication efforts more inclusive for all families.

"I think we're ahead of the curve, heading in the right direction, but we still need to work hard to get to where we need to be to support all the families and to communicate with all of our families effectively," she said.

The board also features three high school students - who represent Collingswood, as well as nearby towns Oaklyn and Woodlynne - who report on different components of their school dynamics each month.

"That's probably my favorite part of the public board meetings," said Rivera, "to hear



them speak on all the many achievements that they're accomplishing and just to hear them be so well-spoken and just to see them involved and to see the rest of the school board really be attentive to them."

"It's definitely an intentional thing, it isn't just for show," she added.

As both a parent of a child in the district and a board member, Rivera is able to play both roles. She can make an impact in her son's life and education, while also being voice for the needs of the other youth and families who are a part of the district, as well.

A Dual Responsibility

Both her work on the school board and at Providence Center can be classified as "intergenerational."

As a board member, Rivera advocates not only for students and their families but also for the school staff and faculty.

Providence Center educates people of all age groups and equips them with valuable information to help them transform their lives and community.

That type of vast impact transfers from the classroom to the home, and vice versa.

"No one doesn't want more for themselves," said Rivera, noting that one of the most effective ways of helping a child can be as simple as just listening to the child.

"I definitely think direction and coaching and being there for them is important, but we actually have to intentionally listen to them," she said. "If you listen well enough, you can kind of build a relationship with that child enough to redirect them and get their respect."

That rule applies to every adult in a child's life, and the more adults the child feels they can trust if they are having an issue, the more beneficial it can be for that child.

"As an adult, we forget what it was like for us to be a kid, and we get disconnected from that," said Rivera.

In both roles, Rivera is able to help guide youth and adults in the areas in which they need it most.

New Growing Concern

The COVID-19 pandemic is affecting daily life for all.

While Rivera serves two very different communities in Collingswood and Fairhill, the impact of the current pandemic is prevalent in both.

"It weighs heavily on me to know that so many already underserved children and families are now facing drastic losses in income, services, and educational resources because of COVID-19," she said.

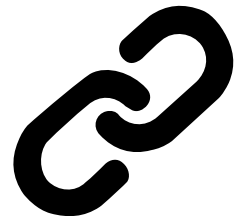
In Fairhill, where 55% of the community live below the poverty line, making it the most economically disadvantaged neighborhood in the city, there is no telling just how the pandemic will negatively impact the already poverty-stricken population.

Providence Center is supposed to be a safe place for the dozens of youth and families who need the various resources and services it provides.

"This pandemic is disproportionately affecting these families... yet we can't be there for them now when they need it most," said Rivera.

Statewide, New Jersey is also dealing with its dilemma as the U.S. state with the second most confirmed cases in the nation.

As the rest of the nation, and the world, continues to take the pandemic day-by-day,



the level of concern will continue to rise, due to the uncertainty.

Like every other nonprofit, the disruption caused by the pandemic puts people, as we as organizations at risk for loss of funds.

While Providence Center strives to be creative and innovative in the ways it engages with clients during these uncertain times, the possibility of lost funding hangs over the organization like a cloud.

“Our focus is to come back stronger than ever because we know our community will need us more than ever,” Rivera said, referring to when the crisis eventually ends.

As someone who has received much-needed help from others in every step of her journey - academically and professionally - Rivera has made it a point of emphasis to help as many people as she can in their journeys, as well.

“My journey means nothing if I can’t give back,” she said.

To get AL DÍA Print Edition at the comfort of your home, please [click here](#)


TAGS

SIRIA RIVERA LEADERS

Please tell us what you think about this story

0 Comments


Sort byOldest




Add a comment...

Facebook Comments plugin

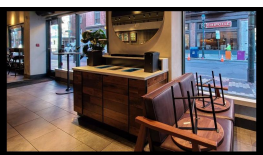
MORE IN LEADERS




Crowns Against the Virus



A Latina Mom's Journey to helping families get a good night's sleep



What you need to know about filing for unemployment in PA right now



Coronavirus and the media: Effectively reporting on and navigating a pandemic





Ad

Next Video

x

Next Video

Cancel

Autoplay is paused

ADVERTISEMENT

© 2019 AL DÍA NEWS Media.

[ABOUT US](#) [ADVERTISE](#) [CONTACT US](#) [NEWS ARCHIVE](#) [PRIVACY](#) [TERM:](#)