

## **Kids learn leadership at Sierra Chavez conference offers empowerment**

**By: Loryll Nicolaisen, Journal Staff Writer  
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Siblings Marisol, left, and Armando Guerrero, center, were among a group performing Aztec dances with Sacramento's Xihuacoatl youth dance group Saturday at Sierra College as part of the Cesar Chavez Youth Leadership Conference. Photo by Ben Furtado/Auburn Journal

ROCKLIN - Yes, you can succeed, and there are many ways to go about it.

This message was pushed by local advocates and professionals who rallied Saturday to provide a multitude of tools and resources to empower teens during the sixth annual Cesar E. Chavez Youth Leadership Conference at Sierra College in Rocklin. Students as young as sixth-graders up to high school seniors came from Placer and Sacramento counties and beyond for the event.

The all-day conference offered a wide range of workshops, facilitated by professionals, for hundreds of students and parents. Attendees learned about a broad range of subjects including careers, gang awareness prevention, empowerment through bilingual poetry, college success and even Aztec dance.

"I think it's freakin' awesome," Jennifer Vizcara, 15, of Esparto, said after participating in a dance led by Sacramento's Xihuacoatl youth dance group in the quad area of campus. "We're trying out new things and it's really fun to me."

Alex Soltero, also 15, of Marysville, opted to take more of an observational approach to learning about Aztec dancing. Soltero said she's attended youth conferences similar to the one on Saturday.

"You get to learn more about your own culture," she said.

The conference, sponsored by the Hispanic Empowerment Association of Roseville, began six years ago a group of education advocates including Rene Aguilera, H.E.A.R. president and conference co-coordinator. Aguilera, a Roseville City School District trustee, said the conference was created as a way to celebrate the life and accomplishments of Cesar Chavez. Chavez's March 31 birthday is a state holiday and is observed because of his accomplishments as co-founder and president of the United Farm Workers.

Aguilera said Saturday that the conference was created with SB 984 in mind. The bill, signed by Gov. Gray Davis in 2000, asked school districts to give an hour of instruction around Chavez's birthday about his life and the impact he had on social justice for farm laborers.

"The bill said one hour," Aguilera said with a laugh. "But you have to start somewhere. He's still seen as a leader for those who need service because he is someone who stood up for them."

Aguilera said a lot has changed for minority students since he was a youth.

"The teachers never pointed at you and said 'Raise your hand,'" he said. "So we have role models tell people to be more aggressive and not be so timid - take your reins. We're trying to give students the tools of getting into college and bettering their situation."

One of those tools, taken advantage of Saturday morning by a group of mostly middle-school students, was a workshop on college success presented by Sierra College's Cynthia Mariano and Ruth Flores.

"The main point we want (to get across) is to stay in school," Mariano told a handful of students. "We want you to dream and education can help you achieve your dreams. We're here to tell you, you can do it, you can go to college."

Anna Jiang, a 12-year-old middle-school student from Woodland, said she wanted to learn more about the possibility of higher education.

"I thought it was really interesting and I wanted to learn more about college and about preparation so I wouldn't be confused," she said.

Mariano, who works with Sierra College's Extended Opportunity Programs and Services department, said students are never be too young to find out that they can go to college.

"It's the little ones that we need to plant seeds with," she said. "We're gardeners today. We're cultivating some better choices for them as they get older."

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