



# Building Futures for “DREAMers” and Young Adults Through Education

by Leticia Valencia, Program Director, Centro Hispano Marista

When my daughters began high school at Marist School in Atlanta, Georgia I learned that the school hosted a remarkable program called Centro Hispano Marista that helps young adults earn their high school equivalency diploma, known as a GED. The program is sponsored by the Society of Mary and, therefore, follows Marist principles. I immediately wanted to be a part of the program, so I became a volunteer teacher and, later, the program director. I have heard many times since then that Centro Hispano Marista is “Mary’s program in the works.”

Centro Hispano Marista, also referred to as Centro, was founded in Atlanta in 2012 by Hispanic leaders and Marist priests. Its initial mission was to serve DREAMers, the young adults who arrived in the United States as children without documentation and who needed a secondary education to apply for immigration relief. Students were drawn to Centro in unprecedented numbers because it offers the only viable path to prepare for GED accreditation and because Centro’s program is one of the few that immigration authorities accept as a valid program.

Over these years, Centro has become a well-established school for adults of any background who want to study and complete their secondary education. Centro offers GED preparation classes in either Spanish or English so that students can pursue better jobs or start a college education. Centro now has over 400 students from 24 countries, including

American citizens. Some students have to drive several hours from remote Georgia towns to take classes every Tuesday night at Marist School.

Centro relies on 50-60 volunteer teachers who serve in the program. They are wonderful, successful people who eagerly give back to our Atlanta community. They teach the academic content, become role models, and more importantly, they truly care about the success of each student. Our volunteer teachers guide students and become their mentors. They discover that it is a humbling experience to change the life of another person and indirectly, the lives of their families. Centro’s teachers do what is seemingly impossible: they pack years of education into just a couple of hours per week, and they work with students who did not finish middle or high school in the traditional way. Somehow, with time and determination from the students, grit and faith from teachers, and a lot of help from heaven, we see results.

Each student is a unique story. I hear some heart-wrenching accounts from students, mainly about how low academic attainment can affect individuals and their entire families, causing issues ranging from long-term ill-advised or uninformed decisions, to endless pain from not having the privileges as others around them. Limited education makes people vulnerable to tragedy, poverty and abuse of all kinds.

Our Lady of Guadalupe is the patroness of Centro, and her words permeate our

message to those students who suffer. Mary said to Juan Diego, “Listen and let it penetrate your heart. Do not be troubled or weighed down with grief. Do not fear any illness or vexation, anxiety, or pain. Am I not here who am your Mother? Are you not under my shadow and protection?” Her words give us peace in turbulent times.

Centro continues to survive in a political environment that has not been favorable to some of our students. We have lost approximately 180 students in the past two years. As much as my team and I try to convince students to continue their studies, we cannot educate someone unless they are willing to learn. I have also seen a lot of misinformation from both sides of the immigration argument. I have witnessed a phenomenon I call the “association cost” where some organizations and individuals in our community would rather not be linked to those helping or educating immigrants because it is not politically safe. I have learned that I cannot change the minds of some but, perhaps if they see what I see, they may change their hearts.

The sad and aching side of Centro is small in contrast to the hopeful and inspirational side. Through our program we see students and those involved with Centro astoundingly transformed because of the education, compassion, and inclusiveness we provide. For example, we have found unconditional support from the Society of Mary and from many kind people, some of whom we do not even personally know, who





**Top:** Class of 2018 Graduation ceremony  
**Inset:** 2018 Graduation class

believe in our mission and have made generous donations so that Centro can keep moving forward.

We get to see new students excitedly arrive at the admission test with a hint of terror. They are afraid to fail in their quest for education – again. They quickly realize that Centro’s staff and teachers welcome them and believe in them. We all understand the struggles of having jobs and families and yet finding the time and motivation to study and advance. It is not easy, and the reasons to quit are always there to tempt them, but we want them to know that it is possible and that it is worth it!

With their GED diploma, graduates can apply for better-paying jobs or get the supervisor positions unavailable to them earlier because they did not hold a high school diploma. They also find the door open to prepare for a trade or to start college or a technical career.

The best part perhaps is to see our graduates feel so much better about themselves. To see that sparkle in their



eyes when they talk about new aspirations and new dreams is greatly satisfying. Our valedictorian this year said to me, “If we are not pursuing what we want, we will never have it, and if we are not moving toward our goals, we will be wasted in the same place.” Nothing seems so impossible after you have done what before looked impossible. The gratitude and the new dreams expressed by all graduates gives everyone at Centro so much satisfaction. We know we are making a difference in our Atlanta community, one student at a time.

The parents of those who graduate wear the widest smiles of anyone at graduation ceremonies. To see their son or daughter, who had previously struggled with school, finally reach their goal fills them with joy

and pride. My favorite part, however, is to watch the next generation. Most Centro students are parents of young or teenage children. These girls and boys see their parents wearing caps and gowns as a result of their hard work and dedication to studies. These children of the Centro graduates have a better chance of staying in school and graduating because of the example their parents are setting. For me, that is one of the best gifts a parent can give to children.

As Centro continues under the mantle of Our Lady of Guadalupe, we will keep going, hoping to build brighter futures for all the adults we help. To learn more about Centro Hispano Marista, visit [www.centrohispanomarista.org](http://www.centrohispanomarista.org).