Maria Evans: Principal, Mother, Cheerleader for Change

At age 53, Maria Evans is at the top of her game, using innovative ideas, technology, and new ways of educating to lift up elementary students at Washington Elementary (as well as their parents) to higher standards of living in a neighborhood riddled with poverty.

Maria Evans grew up in East San Jose on Story and White. It was the rough side of town, her mother an immigrant from Austria, her father an immigrant from Mexico. She was the oldest of three daughters. All of them went to private schools through the sheer determination and hard work of her parents to provide tuition.

Her family today is still in the area, her sisters all very successful in different ways. One question surrounded her children and I alluded that all the students at this school are her children. She roared in laughter and agreed that all 600 of these kids are her kids. She does have a daughter who is 18, and currently going through the college application process. Maria hopes that she will become a Bronco.

She was assigned to Washington Elementary seven years ago by the district office when it was one of the lowest performing elementary schools in the state of California. She did not know if it would be a match for her. She mentioned that there are no guarantees, no certainty, and there are daily battles that she must overcome. She just had to dive in and take on all the responsibility and believe that what she is doing is making a difference. Because unfortunately, what matters to many are those “damn test scores.” Those test scores have indeed gone up and Maria Evans and her school are serving as models for others to replicate.

Ms. Evans, a fellow Santa Clara graduate in psychology reflected on her experience at Santa Clara University and how she became an educator. At SCU, she felt protected, loved, and supported. While in college, she was adamant that education was not her calling. But after meeting with her academic advisor a light bulb went off and she discovered that teaching was indeed what God was calling her to do. Although she says she was not the best student and that she wishes she would have “applied herself” more in those four years, what she took from Santa Clara was beyond grades and GPA.

When I asked what role, other than principal Maria played at Washington, she laughed and said: “Sociologist, jailer, priest, counselor…” the list goes on and on. She explained that she
was simply a conduit for the community. She connects people with resources and fosters community collaboration.

The most important asset of the Washington Community according to Evans is their ability to live on very little. She gave an example of visiting a home meant for two that six were living in or a woman who could only afford to live in a garage. It is their resiliency and ability to make do with almost nothing that most impresses her. Other assets are the high parent involvement at the school and parents sacrifice for the future of their children. They hope and dream for the success of their children.

On the other hand, some of the challenges to overcome are prostitution, drugs, gangs, and domestic violence. These children are in stressful homes. For example, fathers who work as day laborers and are never sure where the next pay check will come from.

In order to meet these challenges Maria believes that one must be charming, a problem solver, charismatic, a cheerleader for change, and have an ability to push the envelope to make the goal. Her dedication and passion is evident as she hugs, kisses, and welcomes everyone, both parents and students as she walks around the classrooms and library. Everyone feels loved and appreciated.

Each and every day she is motivated by those cute faces. “When you look into those eyes…that is what energizes me.” Her hope is to give the children the resources that can allow them to lift themselves up and to do amazing things.

Maria Evans is humble, yet confident and has made unbelievable strides in the community and in Washington Elementary and has seen the fruits of her labor. They look up to her in every sense. Everything happens for a reason, and “all my strengths, talents, and weaknesses” have fit perfectly. “This [Washington Elementary] is where I go to live, not work.” She finally proclaimed that what she does is addicting! Although it has made her life somewhat imbalanced as family becomes second, and here personal health comes third, she is constantly motivated and inspired because “it is so damn interesting!”

-Garrett Jensen
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