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**To the Nth degree**

**Guevara talks about his passion for education, family**

By Deena Hardin

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Since 2005, Dr. Roger Guevara has been Director of the Education Renewal Zone (ERZ) and Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership at Southern Arkansas University. Furthering educational goals was ingrained in him from childhood and is something he continues to strive for — for himself and others.

“One of the issues today, and I believe one of the central issues, is education. That could be the issue of our time, whether it’s seeking to combat poverty, or race relations, or the turmoil between Republicans and Democrats,” Guevara said. With further education, “You start to develop an appreciation … that you would not have otherwise, just being around the diversity of individuals and recognizing that … we are all so complex and interconnected. We have to be tolerant and appreciative not of the differences but of the complementary aspects that make us stronger as a whole.”

Guevara was born and raised in San Antonio, Texas, one of three children. “San Antonio is unique rich in culture and tradition. When you go downtown, to the River Walk, it’s almost like stepping into another world, another country. The stones cry out with stories. Of course, that’s the cradle of liberty, with the Alamo. So many people from all over our infant nation thought enough of liberty and freedom to go down there and defend that.”

Of his childhood, Guevara said, “My parents were bilingual. They were Americans — they both were born in Texas — but we had that Hispanic culture that just ran so deep. We had this very interesting blend of Texas culture and Mexican culture. I consider myself doubly blessed. I’m fluent in Spanish. It’s a beautiful language.”

Although English is his first language, Guevara likes to practice speaking Spanish whenever he can.

“My grandfather had a garage in Crystal City, Texas. While my dad and my brother and my grandfather were busy swapping engines and doing brakes, at six years old I was pumping gas and checking oil, putting air in the tires, washing windshields. I learned about customer relations and counting money. I learned responsibility. It was a magical time,” he said.

While his parents were “not wealthy by any means” and he grew up in an humble part of San Antonio, “We were rich in love and expectations. My father and mother were just all about academic performance and leadership. It was all about ‘You’ve got to go out there and you’ve got to make a difference. You’ve got to serve others.’ They actually modeled that kind of behavior instead of just telling me about it.”

Guevara’s father worked at Kelly Air Force Base as a civil servant but used the G.I. Bill to take night classes at St. Mary’s University. Over a period of years, he was able to earn a degree. His father passed away in 2008, but his mother, who just turned 80, lives in Round Rock, near Austin.

Both of Guevara’s siblings are older than he is, by eight and nine years. He looked to them, too, as examples of academic achievement. “They graduated and went to college right off the bat. My brother set a very high bar — he graduated from Stanford. My sister graduated from Our Lady of the Lake and got her master’s degree, also.” The younger Guevara’s goal of getting into Stanford University would not come until later.

While Guevara did his undergraduate studies as an English major at Texas Tech, he worked as a lifeguard, something he had also done in high school. “I took a water safety instructor class and also something called adaptive aquatics instruction, and that is basically teaching kids with different kinds of physical challenges how to maneuver and adapt in the water. I found that I had a gift for relating to these individuals. I thought, ‘If I can do this in the pool, I wonder how good I’d be in the classroom.’ I started taking the right courses to be a certified teacher. That’s the thing that I would always recommend, trying to leave college with some sort of certification.”

The summer before his first teaching job, he was a pool manager for the City of San Antonio. The pool supervisor asked what he was going to do since he was finished with his degree. “He was already pushing me. I have no doubt the Lord put him right there in my ear to tell me those exact words. He said, ‘Someone like you needs to be in administration for schools.’ I had never, ever considered that. This was before I even started my first day of teaching.”

In 1985, he began his first teaching job, at John F. Kennedy High School in San Antonio. “I dedicated myself to being the best possible teacher I could be and, on the last day of school, I started my master’s in educational leadership.”

Guevara went on to earn that degree from the University of Texas at San Antonio three years later. During his studies, he served as vice principal of a middle school and a high school, then as principal of a new magnet school in Edgewood ISD, where he was in on designing the school as well as hiring teachers and choosing students. Texas Gov. Ann Richards did the ribbon-cutting.

“At the end of that year, I had the chance to start on my doctorate at the University of Texas [at Austin]. I had an opportunity and I took it.” He was offered a $60,000 fellowship to work on that degree, taking a pay cut and a leap of faith that things would work out.

After the fellowship ran out, Guevara served as superintendent of Houston's Can Academy, a charter school, during the remaining time working on his doctorate. “My heart really was in higher education. As soon as I finished that doctorate, I had the chance to go to Tarleton immediately.” Prior to his work with the ERZ and in educational leadership at SAU, Guevara served as the alternative teacher certification supervisor at Tarleton State University in Stephenville, Texas.

While being a teacher, school administrator, and superintendent brought increasingly large numbers of students under his influence, working with the ERZ has a much broader scope. “That’s where I think that my strengths are, being able to work with others and create a bigger sphere of influence. Now I work with 14 different school districts, 56 different schools. It is quite an undertaking. I have to be able to exert an influence in a positive and meaningful way. We’ve been able to generate millions of dollars in grants specifically for STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) education. Clearly, we are moving towards a (STEM) future. The only way to really address this is to make sure that students are well prepared to meet those goals.”

Teacher preparation is crucial for students to meet those goals, Guevara said. “We have to invest in teacher development and leadership development, because our leaders need to have a vision of what life needs to be like in this new millennium. If the leadership is not in place, you’re going to see teacher excellence in pockets, as opposed to systemically. That’s why my passion has always been for leadership.”

Guevara sees mathematics and literacy — and even music — being embedded in science curriculum in public schools to create a trans-disciplinary perspective going into the future. “You can put it in real-world contexts, so that the teachers can expose these kids to scenarios that they understand.”

The same holds true in higher education, he said. “We have to go from the theoretical to the practical. The challenge for higher education is the completion rate. We get plenty of people that can get into higher ed, but we fall a little bit short as a nation in that we don’t have the completers that we should. You’ve got to finish at some point.”

“Junior colleges … have a key role in the scheme of moving our state and nation forward. Community colleges are so key because not everybody is going to go to a four-year institution,” Guevara said. He pointed specifically to SAU Tech’s welding program.

“Some of the participants go out there and develop those skills and get great-paying jobs. It's just a matter of finding your niche, where you can go forward and get a job.”

Mandy Gray, an administrative assistant in the School of Education, travels to schools and education cooperative centers to help Guevara with his work.

“If you look at our calendar … Mandy has to go out and do some stuff because I can’t do it all. Mandy and I are truly appreciative of Southern Arkansas University because, without SAU, this region would not be the same. It’s the anchor, the heart and soul.”

“There’s a family atmosphere here. You’re able to come and feel like you’re at home. The SAU community is a family, the organizations are family,” Gray said. Guevara said that he and Gray run the ERZ office as a team.

“We have been recognized by the U.S. Department of Education for seven out of the last eight years for being a model for grants, research, providing professional development. I was asked to say a few words at the national conference for the U.S. Department of Education. All the other project directors in the nation were listening to this,” he said. “It was a really good opportunity for Southern Arkansas University literally to lead the nation in strategies to address dwindling resources while taking into account spiraling accountability.” In his speech, Guevara talked about those dwindling resources but challenged other project directors to tap into industry in their communities as a resource, not only for financial assistance but also for lending their expertise to mentoring partnerships.

“The Education Renewal Zone seeks to find regional challenges and then use economies of scale and address things of a more global nature so that each individual district doesn’t have to go it alone. We can pool our resources and figure out the best ways to embed technology throughout the curriculum, to look at that trans-disciplinary perspective, to put things in real-world context so that kids can understand it. Those kinds of things are the same in Horatio as they are in Genoa,” Guevara said.

Recently, Guevara worked up a strategic plan for the Magnolia schools. “That is an ambitious plan. It is something that I do believe will set Magnolia on a trajectory for a world class education. One of the things that the superintendent [John Ward] and I stressed to everybody involved is that we’re going to dream the dream and then figure it out later. Let’s go to the nth degree for our children.”

Guevara’s daughter Sarah Elizabeth, a senior at Magnolia High School, is a National Hispanic Merit Scholar. She interviewed for admission to Harvard, is on the waiting list for Stanford and has been accepted to the University of Arkansas and the University of Texas. Guevara said it looks like she’ll be headed to the University of Texas — following in her dad’s footsteps. “I’m all about whatever is going to develop her as a person, because your youth is fleeting. Twenty years go by in a blink,” he said.

He and his wife Debbie, an educator in the El Dorado schools who is originally from Coal Hill, have a younger daughter, Mariah Grace, who is a ninth grader at Magnolia Junior High.

“She’s pretty amazing. Her beauty is only exceeded by her brilliance. She’s an intellectual giant. She’s on the tennis team,” said her proud father.

Both girls are into various musical pursuits. “My daughters’ love of music translates into so many other areas. They become very inquisitive about things.”

Outside work, Guevara makes time to baby some vintage vehicles — a 1977 Camaro he’s had since high school, a 1994 Harley Davidson and a 1995 Impala Super Sport — and to participate in sporting events.

“I’m the two-time defending gold medalist on bench press for Senior Olympics. They have that at Hot Springs every year. I always thought it would be cool to be the strongest old dude around. Along the way, I got the gold medal in archery. Oh, and I got the silver in the 50-meter dash.”

The family is active in First United Methodist Church in Magnolia. “The church does a really good job of being community engaged, with the Stew Pot. It’s more than just hearing something on Sunday and then going your separate ways. They actually try to make a difference,” he said.

Guevara is on the board for Leadership Magnolia and has served as a member of the board of Magnolia Arts.

“I appreciate the things that Magnolia Arts does. Where would we be without the arts? And I appreciate the things that Leadership Magnolia does.”

Education is not away from his mind for long. “Now is the opportunity to have all hands on deck and invest in our children for the future of this community, this state, and this nation,” Guevara said.

Gray added that, while SAU supports the community, SAU needs support from the community.

“The older generation, the older leaders, have to be willing to invest in the younger generation, not necessarily financially, but through their time and their wisdom. Having older members of the community reaching out to younger members is very vital,” she said. “Sometimes people don’t know the need.”

“An underutilized resource is our senior citizens,” Guevara said. “Mentorship is so important. Let me not limit this to just Magnolia.” Guevara went on to say that anyone who has ideas for ways to help out in K-12 schools or at the college level is welcome to run those ideas by him and/or Gray.

“It would give teachers the energy they need to continue what they're doing,” Gray said of volunteers going into public schools. “Teachers can get frustrated. To know that there’s somebody outside their school that has their back … it’s going to help retain teachers. And it’s going to give teachers an even better support system.”

With more than 80 student organizations on the SAU Campus, Gray said finding someone to go into the public schools to help wouldn't be a problem.

“If there’s a need there and it’s given to the appropriate department … there’s somebody that’s going to be willing to come out there.”

Guevara is always looking for ways to bring people together for a common goal: “Teaching kids is the most noble thing in the world to me,” he said. He’s also still working on his own education. “Last spring break, I was admitted to do post doctoral work at Stanford. Thirty years later, I get admitted!”