

NSRF's Living History: An Interview with Ileana Liberatore

Debbie Bambino, Pennsylvania

Ileana Liberatore, a leading member of the San Antonio Local Center, is a native Texan from Crystal City, Texas. Ileana is pleased to share that her birthplace, Crystal City, is also the birthplace of La Raza Unida Party. She is also proud of her parents' accomplishments. Ileana's father worked as a migrant worker and later became the first Latino chancellor in the University of California's system; her mother, an immigrant from Mexico, became the director of the California Museum of Photography after raising her family.



Ileana Liberatore

What's your current role and how did you get involved with CFGs and NSRF?

I am currently the professional development school coordinator at Lee High School and The International School of the Americas (ISA). Both schools are located on one campus. I got involved with CFGs accidentally. My administrator went to a Winter Meeting and was so excited by the experience that she found funding to send a group from our school to a CFG training at Souhegan High School in New Hampshire. As a department chair, I was invited to attend. Even though I wasn't sure what to expect, once I got there it really changed the way I saw my role as a teacher and how I could affect change.

Can you tell us a little more about your background as a teacher?

I've been the PDS coordinator for the last three years. I was a classroom Latin teacher for 20 years in Dallas and San Antonio. Most of my experience has been in high schools, but I did teach Latin in a middle school for three years.

How does your work connect with NSRF's mission?

I use CFG practices and structures in my work with both practicing teachers and undergraduate and graduate students in education programs. I am currently coaching three CFGs, one on each campus and one that is a CFG of coaches.

I have an insider-outsider role in the schools. I use my outsider lens to push things along. For example, travelling with ISA's junior class the last

two years as they toured civil rights historical sites in Alabama, Latino students asked me, "Where are the Latinos? What were we doing during all of this?" To help them answer that question, I decided to teach a two-week mini-course on the history of the Chicano Civil Rights Movement, one of the least studied social movements of the 1960s. The feedback from students was overwhelmingly positive. Students told me repeatedly that they appreciated

the opportunity to learn not only about the role Mexican-Americans had in the Civil Rights Movement, but also to have conversations with me and other students about their experiences as Americans of Mexican descent.

Can you tell our readers more about the student population?

At ISA the population is very diverse. Students are selected by lottery and represent a cross section of the community: 450 students across racial, academic, socio-economic, and school experiences. Our junior and senior classes are about 45% Latino and 2% African-American; the remaining 55% are White or Asian.

We recognize that even though incoming students make a choice to attend the International School, they still need personalized supports as they make the transition to ninth grade and a new environment outside their home communities.

What are your biggest challenges in this work?

I would have to say that my biggest challenge is sustaining the work. We started our local Center in 2004 and the work in schools is going well. Every third faculty meeting in my schools is a CFG meeting. We continue to train new coaches every year and we have decided on voluntary rather than mandatory CFG participation. We hold several citywide forums each year and will be discussing Deborah Meier's essay, "Undermining Democracy," at our upcoming Fall Forum.

While CFGs are voluntary on both campuses I work with, at the large campus only 35 of the 187 eligible faculty members are in groups. *(continued on page 14)*

permission to say "We don't know." It gives us permission to open up our classroom doors and ask colleagues for help. We can walk into someone's classroom and say, "Since I'm not exactly sure what I'm doing, my guess is that you might not be either. Maybe together, we can figure something out." We can't look to the state standards to figure it all out. We can't externalize our involvement and complicity in the status quo. We can interrupt some of those realities of schooling in this country.

I think that part of it has to do with the misogynistic legacy. Most teachers in this country remain female: they're middle class, they're white, they're in their forties, and they're women. And most administrators across the country are still men. So you have a situation that began well over 100 years ago in which the political authority is male dominated and the workforce is female dominated. I think part of the isolation in classrooms originated as a survival strategy: one that we have to unpack together in order to make the changes that we know we need to make.

I'm afraid that a lot of people in Houston don't really associate their CFG work with NSRF yet. We're working on that, but would are some things you say to encourage Houstonians to be part of NSRF and to feel connected to NSRF?

Become a member - even at the smallest contribution level. Through a robust Center of Activity like Houston A+ Challenge, it's important to push the notion that NSRF is a collective and a membership organization.

Members are involved in a national movement. I think that NSRF is a stronger movement than an organization. Our Centers of Activity are very strong organizations, but I think NSRF national is really a movement. CFG work is having an effect in Houston and in Greater Texas, as it clearly is, and if it is part of people's teaching craft, then I would encourage folks to become members and officially become a part of the movement.

That's a great call to action to end on, and we'll let you get out to your next appointment.

Well, thank you very much. I hope that was helpful. ■

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However, we have seen the extension of Looking at Student Work and other practices in departmental and level or content area meetings. While I'm heartened by these changes in culture, I wish everyone were in CFGs for their own learning benefit.

As a Latina, part of my concern for sustaining the work has to do with our ability to attract and sustain a diverse group of coaches and national facilitators. Our community is 60% Latino/a and we need to attract and sustain more minority coaches.

What do you see as NSRF's greatest challenge in this period?

Right now, I think we are defining ourselves as an organization. We are deciding how we are going to work together across the country. I think people have a good sense of what we should be doing but not how we need to work together as an organization. We are figuring out how to have enough structure and enough space so we can all "belong" and answer the question "How do I fit in?"

What are your greatest hopes for your work and NSRF in the coming period?

I want my work to keep growing. We have trained coaches in 12 area school districts and 28 schools, and we are introducing a new high school to our work. I want to keep supporting our established schools and serve them well.

I am on the Planning Committee and I hope our Winter Meeting will be a defining event.

What would a "defining" Winter Meeting look like?

Everybody would have a great learning experience and would see it as time well spent. Participants would make connections with colleagues from across the country and would leave with an understanding of shared work and shared hope for the future of our work. ■



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