News



Lupita Castañeda-Liles, fourth from the left, takes part in a performance of a Mexican folkloric dance group she is part of at Notre Dame High School in San José, California. (Courtesy of Monica Gomez)

by Jeannine M. Pitas

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

October 3, 2022

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

When Lupita Castañeda-Liles began seventh grade at the Catholic elementary school she'd been attending her whole life, she encountered an unpleasant surprise: Some of her classmates, who previously had been her friends, started bullying her.

"She came home from school sad and crying," says her mother, María del Socorro Castañeda, a former professor at Santa Clara University and the author of the 2018 book *Our Lady of Everyday Life: La Virgen de Guadalupe and the Catholic Imagination of Mexican Women in America*.

"At Santa Clara, I'd taught classes on women's rights," she told NCR. "It was hard to watch my daughter going through this experience of bullying. We looked online for organizations dealing with teenage Latina girls and mental health. There were sites on teen mental health generally, and a few on African American girls and mental health, but we couldn't find any on Latina mental health specifically. We saw a need to fill that gap."

Today, Lupita is a 15-year-old sophomore at Notre Dame High School in San José, California, and chief inspirational officer of Becoming Mujeres, an organization dedicated to the empowerment of Latina teenage girls and the people who care for them. Since starting the organization three years ago, mother and daughter have given workshops in elementary schools, high schools and colleges. Topics include self-care, overcoming imposter syndrome, and honoring one's culture.

"We begin the workshops by telling our story. It's more of a dialogue with reflection. The goal is not to come in and say, 'Let me teach you how to be mentally healthy,' but to share our stories and collectively find healing," she says.



María del Socorro Castañeda and her daughter Lupita Castañeda-Liles hold a Becoming Mujeres online workshop in 2021. (Courtesy of Monica Gomez)

When the pandemic began mere months after the organization's founding, mother and daughter shifted to online workshops in many settings, including San José State University and Texas Christian University in Fort Worth. One workshop was at Notre Dame High School in San José.

"She was great," says Monica Gomez, an alumna of the school who works in donor relations and also advises Latinas Unidas, a student group focused on Latina culture and identity. Latinas Unidas hosted a Becoming Mujeres workshop online in December 2021.

"At the time, she was only in eighth grade, but she was a teenager whom our students could see as someone like them," Gomez adds. "She shared her personal story, she and her mom building this network that might enlighten other students facing challenges like envy among classmates, racial intolerance, pressures brought on by social media, and bullying. Many teens face this, but young women of color

face it more."

Gomez said teenage Latina girls must confront unique challenges due to internal cultural pressures alongside external stereotyping and discrimination.

"It's hard to manage a persona when we feel we have to modify our culture for others," Lupita told NCR. "There are multiple things about our culture we appreciate — our dance, music, singing, food, our interpersonal relations. From an outsider's perspective, people jump to conclusions, especially about our music."

Despite the challenges, Gomez sees a movement toward greater empowerment of girls in her community.

"Culturally, Latinas are told to be respectful and kind, to not speak up to elders when there is tension, but I see that changing," she said. "Our students are more empowered now. Social justice causes have helped this. Black Lives Matter raised a huge amount of awareness. As young women of color, we have to prove ourselves. We constantly have to show that there is more to us than a stereotype."

> "The goal is not to come in and say, 'Let me teach you how to be mentally healthy,' but to share our stories and collectively find healing."
>
> —Lupita Castañeda-Liles
>
> Tweet this

Now that the pandemic has ebbed, the Castañedas are starting to return to in-person workshops. For Lupita, it continues to be personally healing and empowering.

"Sometimes hardships do happen for a reason," she said. "I don't always have access to all the help that I need. But sometimes the reason we go through these difficulties is that we have to accommodate the way we react to different situations to avoid going through them again as an adult. As painful as it is now, regardless of how you see it, it will be beneficial in the future."

For María del Socorro, this project is rooted in her Catholic faith and upbringing.

"The roots of Becoming Mujeres are deeply Catholic," she said. "I have Chicana colleagues who think the only way to empowerment is by doing away with anything

that has to do with the institutional church. This attitude has always caused me pain. Yes, there are ways of being Catholic that are damaging to women. I list these in my book — narratives from the women I interviewed.

"At the same time, the book is about the life-giving things that come from being Catholic: the sense of being anchored in your family and culture, of being rooted in a faith that when you need it will help you surpass life's difficulties. The important thing is to learn to way to navigate Catholicism, to find a way we can continue moving in our faith as we are seeking to carve a dignified space within the Catholic Church."

Lupita agrees with her mother. "Catholicism has negative aspects, but I recognize good aspects that motivate me to be who I am today. Religion is something I can grow from. The concept that there is something greater than us comforts me and makes me feel that the work we're doing is worthwhile."

Advertisement

María del Socorro recalls that when she was a teenager, she received much practical guidance from the church in the form of her parish priest, Fr. Mateo Sheedy, who urged her to apply to Santa Clara University.

"I'd migrated to the U.S. at 9 and was tracked into non-college courses, even in junior high," she explained.

"They put me in sewing, woodshop, Future Farmers of America. Latinx students didn't have the grades for college. I ended up in community college, which is great if you have mentorship. But if you don't, you can fall through the cracks easily," she said.

María del Socorro said it was Sheedy who "kept asking me when I'd be transferring to Santa Clara." She said Sheedy also provided help in convincing the school to admit her, even though her grades were lower than other students and a counselor had suggested that she consider applying to a different institution.

"Father Mateo faxed the provost, telling them I was the type of student they needed. 'You'd be crazy not to accept María Castañeda,' " she recalled.

Lupita, who hopes to study psychiatry and work in the mental health field, has always been inspired by her mother's story.

"As Latinos, we are underrepresented in many aspects but especially in academia," she said. "When I was younger, my mother was my model of success. There were no celebrities I looked up to that had the achievements I wanted. But the story made me realize that if my own mother could do it, I have no excuses."

María del Socorro urges everyone to maintain a mindset of growth.

"I tell people to shine their light big and bright," she said. "If people don't like it, they can put some shades on."

A version of this story appeared in the **Oct 14-27, 2022** print issue under the headline: San José nonprofit promotes Latina teen mental health.