



NEWS RELEASE

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Santa Ana College Alumna Irasema Salcido Receives 2015 California Community College Distinguished Alumni Award

From migrant farm worker to nationally recognized educator

(Santa Ana, CA) – Prominent Santa Ana College (SAC) graduate and founder of Washington, DC’s Cesar Chavez Public Charter School for Public Policy Irasema Salcido will be honored as a recipient of the prestigious 2015 California Community College Distinguished Alumni Award, sponsored by the Community College League of California. The award will be presented at the League’s Annual Convention, Nov. 20-21, in Burlingame.

Born and raised by her grandmother in a small village in Michoacán, Mexico, Salcido moved to the U.S. at the age of 14 to join her four older siblings and parents. Throughout her teens, she worked in fields picking strawberries from dawn to dusk alongside her family. When she arrived in the U.S., she knew little English. She attended Loara and Bolsa Grande High Schools and struggled with the complexities of learning English, making it difficult to pass her classes.

It was happenstance that Salcido walked onto the Santa Ana College campus after high school and learned, to her surprise, that community college classes at the time were offered free of charge. She recalls that the prospect of working full-time to support herself through college, though incredibly daunting, was a good incentive to avoid a lifetime as a migrant farm worker. Her hardened drive and work ethic allowed her to work in the fields, a shoe store, a department stores, an office, and a bank just to support herself and her family as she passed her college classes. Perhaps her most important job she had was as an outreach counselor to underserved youth. By encouraging minorities to pursue a college education, Salcido knew that she had found her calling.

“Without Santa Ana College and the opportunities I received there, I wouldn’t have been able to achieve what I have achieved,” she said. “Community colleges are there to help people like me who have few options. I owe so much to Santa Ana College and the opportunities I had there; teachers who really care and a life that became my new life, my other life.”

After completing her studies at Santa Ana College in 1983, Salcido transferred to Cal State Fullerton (CSUF) where she continued to work for student affirmative action, a cause that increasingly became her passion. After graduating from CSUF, she worked for MALDEF, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund. She later pursued her master’s degree in education at Harvard University. Upon earning her master’s, she became a high school administrator in Washington, DC, only to become frustrated that many of her students were graduating without knowing how to read, write or do basic math.

In 1997, pregnant with her fifth child, Salcido took a huge risk—she opened her own charter school. Her first Cesar Chavez Public Charter School for Public Policy began in the basement of Safeway store in 1998 with 60 students. Today, the charter school serves over 1,400 students on four campuses. Now a nationally recognized expert and advocate for charter schools and helping underserved students achieve academic success, Salcido recently retired after running the schools for 16 years.

“It was very challenging to be a pioneer for charter schools, especially because I was also raising a family of my own,” she admits. But by teaching students from poverty-stricken neighborhoods plagued by drugs and violence about public policy and requiring them to take action on issues that concerned them, she helped her students see that they could have the power to positively impact their community. Learning about issues ranging from prisoner discrimination to undocumented immigration helps the students feel that they can make a difference.

“I realize what college can do in one’s life,” she said. “I urge them to discover their passion and decide what they want to change.”

Salcido was a 2015 Santa Ana College Hall of Fame Alumni Achievement Award honoree, a 2005 Cal State Fullerton Vision & Visionaries honoree, a recipient of the Use Your Life Award from Oprah Winfrey’s Angel Network, and a recipient of the Republican National Committee’s Trail Award for dedication to civil and public service.

The 2015 California Community College Distinguished Alumni Award recognizes and honors outstanding men and women whose attendance at a California community college helped them achieve their educational and professional goals and serve their communities. The League has recognized the distinguished alumni of California’s community colleges since 1964.

About Santa Ana College

Santa Ana College (SAC), which is turning 100 years old in 2015, serves about 18,000 students each semester at its main campus in Santa Ana. The college prepares students for transfer to four-year institutions, provides invaluable workforce training, and customized training for business and industry. In addition, another 11,000 students are served through the college’s School of Continuing Education located at Centennial Education Center. Ranked as one of the nation’s top two-year colleges awarding associate degrees to Latino and Asian students, the college is also recognized throughout the state for its comprehensive workforce training programs for nurses, firefighters, law enforcement and other medical personnel. SAC is one of two comprehensive colleges under the auspices of the Rancho Santiago Community College District. Visit www.sac.edu to learn more. For information about Santa Ana College’s Centennial, please visit www.sac.edu/100.

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