



HOLDREGE PUBLIC SCHOOLS FOUNDATION

Giving Back to Education

HHS Alumni Recognition Feature!

Dear HHS Alumni and HPS Foundation Supporters,

Holdrege High School is fortunate to have many very successful graduates. We are excited to continue sharing the stories of some of those HHS Alums thanks to the journalistic talents of Kristine (Long) Jacobson, Class of 1990.

We also welcome your suggestions and comments.

Sincerely,

*Teresa Kroll, Chairman
HPS Foundation Committee*

Monica Fuentes Mueller - Class of 2004

Monica Fuentes Mueller Shares Biracial Experiences in TedX Talk

By Kristine Jacobson

HHS graduate Monica (Fuentes) Mueller stood on a stage in Lincoln last fall in front of a crowd 400-500 people to share a message with the world.

The 2004 Holdrege High School graduate related her experiences of being biracial in her TEDx talk, "Tostones and Kolaches."

"I am so thankful that someone taught me that the collision of worlds that makes me who I am is beautiful," Monica said in her talk. "Now, I can share with my students that all of their collisions are beautiful, too."

Monica grew up in Holdrege, where she loved dancing the salsa with her Puerto Rican dad and eating cherry kolaches with her Caucasian mom's family in Kansas. Now, she serves as the Assistant Director of Multicultural Affairs at the University of Nebraska at Kearney, where she helps students explore their cultural identities. The class she created, Who Do You Think You Are? The Impact of Culture on Personal Identity



Monica Fuentes Mueller - Class of 2004

Development, is making on big impact on students' cultural awareness and ability to live alongside friends and neighbors of different opinions and cultures.

Growing Up in Holdrege

Monica grew up in Holdrege and enjoyed being the culturally diverse one in her class. "I didn't grow up around a lot of diversity," she said in her TEDx talk. "I got asked to play the Latino role in 'Bye Birdie.' I got to talk to my class about diversity."

She embraced her cultural heritage and enjoyed many activities in high school, including theater, music, speech team Oral Interpretation of Drama competitions, volleyball, track, Future Educators of America, choir, and show choir.

Her speech and drama involvement was good training for her current role as a teacher and for her once-in-a-lifetime speaking engagement in the TEDx talk in September 2016.

Although Monica said she was never really shy in front of people, she did have a fear of singing on stage alone. It was a fear that HHS choir teacher Mark Butler helped her overcome. "The first time I had to sing a solo, I tried to get out of it, and he (Mr. Butler) wouldn't let me," Monica said. "He forced me to sort of get over it. I think I just needed that push of somebody telling me, you can do this." Once she performed her first solo, her fears disappeared, and she has performed many more solos during her life.

She also appreciated the advice and guidance of Mrs. Kris Olson, who was her speech and drama teacher and coach.

College Years

After graduating from HHS, Monica pursued a teaching degree at the University of Nebraska at Kearney. During her first months at UNK, Monica got involved with programs through the Office of Multicultural Affairs. She joined the Hispanic Student Association and, as she explains in her TEDx talk, she received some strange looks because of her light skin and eyes.

"I loved being Puerto Rican, but it was never hard because I looked white," Monica said about her early years in Holdrege. "The fact that I looked white meant that I could be Puerto Rican when I wanted to be and white when I wanted to be. For me, it was harder to come to college and be Latina because I looked white."

She also received strange looks when she joined another association. "I was also in the Asian Student Association because my friends were in it, and it was really small," she said. "That was fun because I got to learn a lot about Asian culture, too."

Through her experiences at UNK, Monica realized she had a passion for diversity, cultures, and social justice. Monica earned a bachelor's degree in education/communication disorders and was accepted into graduate school to become a speech pathologist. Then she had a change of heart. "I realized what I loved was working with college students," she said. She decided to change her area of study to counseling and student affairs.

"I was really involved in multicultural affairs as a student and had invested a lot in it and wanted to keep going with that," she said. She was a graduate assistant in the Office of Multicultural Affairs during college, and in 2011 was hired as the Assistant Director for Multicultural Affairs and still works there today.

Career Path

In her role at UNK, Monica mainly works with students one-on-one to encourage retention, but she also wears a log of other hats, including advising the Hispanic and Asian Student Associations she was part of in college. She also provides a diversity perspective as she serves on several campus committees, such as the Women, Gender and Ethnic Studies Committee; the Sexual Assault Task Force; and an alcohol task force. She also oversees the campus food pantry, which she helped start in 2012.

But the most rewarding part of Monica's job is making an impact on students through the class she created and teaches. Her class, *Who Do You Think You Are? The Impact of Culture on Personal Identity Development*, is offered in three sections each fall and two sections each spring and is taught by Monica and other teachers.

The idea for the class began when Monica enrolled in a multicultural counseling class in graduate school. She and the other students in her class agreed that what they were learning should be offered to all college students, not just graduate students. The class she created touches on privilege and racism and makes people step out of their comfort zones, Monica said. They discuss oppression, personal identity development, world view, family histories, immigration, sexual orientation, and other hot button issues.

"I tell my students it's about learning to live your life and learning to interact with people who are different from you," Monica said. Her work in creating this class and continuing to teach it has made an impact.

"I feel like it's making a difference, and that's really important to me," she said. "The majority of the students in these classes are from small-town Nebraska and haven't been exposed to a lot of diversity. Just the opportunity to be able to help open people's eyes to the different things outside of their own worldview, outside of their bubble. I just love it. I'm really passionate about it. That class and creating that class has helped me to do this on a larger scale than I could have done without it."

One student's evaluation comments revealed just how important this class has become. "I learned more in this class than I have in the past 18 years of my life living in the world," Monica said the student wrote.

TEDX Talk

In the summer of 2016, Monica received a mass e-mail seeking speakers for the September TEDx talk in Lincoln. The theme was "Ideas that Bring Us Together."

TED is a nonprofit worldwide organization devoted to spreading ideas, usually in the form of short, powerful talks (18 minutes or less).

"When I saw the email, I immediately thought this could be a really neat opportunity for me to talk about my life being biracial," she said. She survived several rounds of cuts and eventually was chosen as one of 11 speakers out of 69 applicants to talk at the event.

Although Monica admits she seldom prepares ahead of time for speaking in front of large crowds, this was different. She was assigned a coach, who gave her tips and helped her refine her message to be effective and powerful. Then, she memorized it and created a catchy title, "Tostones and Kolaches."

"I wanted to do something sort of fun and quirky, that people might not know right away when they see the title what the speech was going to be about," she

said. "I just love food. I think that food is such an important thing for culture, so that's why I went with food."

Hundreds of people watched her 10-minute talk live in the audience. Many more listeners, including relatives in Puerto Rico and students at UNK, watched it livestreamed. Her goal was to raise awareness of people who are biracial.

"When we talk about race, we sometimes get forgotten," she said "I think that people who are biracial tend to get lumped into one group or another group, mostly based on what they look like. Some people are cool with that, but other people really identify with both, and they should be able to do that."

And the message resonated with her students and others. "I have a lot of students who are biracial who were really excited to hear it," she said.

Outside Interests

When Monica is not working, she enjoys spending time with her family. She is married to Bryan Mueller, who is a 2003 graduate of Holdrege High School. He is a science teacher at Kearney High School. They have three children: Giana, 8; Colvin, 4; Emilia, 2; and one on the way in April.



Monica Fuentes Mueller and husband Bryan Mueller with their children, Emilia, Giana, and Colvin

She also serves on the board of Kearney's Jubilee Center, which provides outreach services for people in need.

She credits her heart for service to her parents, Eric and Sharon Fuentes. And, the support she receives from her UNK co-workers and her husband allow her to continue to follow her passion.

"There's always a battle to be fought working with diversity,"

she said. "As much as I complain about that, I love it. I think I would be bored if there was never anything to change."

To watch Monica's TEDx talk, click on the following YouTube link:

<https://www.ted.com/tedx/events/18776>

About Us

The mission of the HPS Foundation is to support and enhance the educational efforts of students and teachers of Holdrege Public Schools by providing funding for innovative and challenging programs, learning experiences, and activities.

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