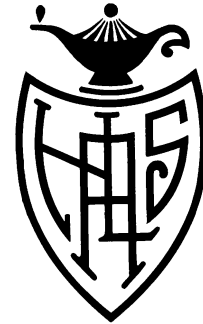




DISTINGUISHED ALUMNI - 2015

LINDA CRUZ-LARES

CLASS OF 1974



Linda Cruz-Lares was born on July 18, 1956, in Albert Lea MN, the youngest of 10 children born to Alfredo and Gregoria (Luna) Cruz. Both of Linda's parents were immigrants from Mexico; Linda is a first generation U.S. citizen. Albert Lea has always been Linda's home community. Linda maintains an active relationship with her extended family, including her three sisters and one brother who are still living.

Linda attended Ramsey Elementary School for kindergarden, then switched to St. Theodore Catholic School for first - sixth grade. She attended Southwest Junior High School in grades seven through nine where she participated in chorus and then went to Albert Lea Senior High School for grades 10-12. During high school most of her free time was spent helping at home. As the last child at home, Linda became the primary driver as her parents aged. She was also a busy helper with her parents' commitments at church. Her parents' home was a central gathering place on Sundays for migrant/seasonal families traveling and working within the area and to and from southern states. Much time was spent cooking and serving food to their many guests every week. Linda's parents were her role models for her giving and generous spirit.

(Continued on the next page)

In Linda's junior year in high school she also began helping others with English language support. She recalled working with Marge Lukehart and Eduardo Salcedo on a feedback committee as they tried to encourage second language learners to stay in high school. She also worked with Roger Olson and community education to provide English language support to new adults in the community, which is where she met and worked with Jan Mattson, who thought she was much more mature than a high school junior.

After graduating in 1974, Linda attended Mankato State University for three years. During Linda's junior year, she participated in the university exchange program with the University of Guadalajara, Mexico, during winter quarter. Linda's parents had always impressed upon her the value of education, so she recalled their pride when she was able to attend the University of Guadalajara.

Linda said this was one of her most treasured and encouraging life experiences. Not only did it make Linda proud of her Mexican heritage and culture, it contributed to her desire to make her life's work one of promoting cultural diversity, understanding, and respect for all people.

When her father died unexpectedly, she came home to help her mother with her responsibilities. Linda began working with Minnesota Community Action Agencies in 1978. As an Outreach worker for Minnesota Migrant Council, Linda welcomed parents and children to academic programs that supported and educated the families who had left their home base in southern states to come to Minnesota to harvest vegetable crops during the summer. Working mostly with Steel County organizations, Linda worked as a bilingual/bicultural parent advocate, helping parents and children in programs from Early Childhood to Adult Basic Education and English as a Second Language; they gained opportunities that migrant families had not had before.

Linda was offered an opportunity to work for Freeborn County Community Action in 1986 as a Family Development Coordinator for the newly formed Community Action Agency in Freeborn County. During Linda's 15-year tenure years with Freeborn County, she had an opportunity to provide many supportive programs to assist individuals and families in reaching self-reliance.

During her years working with Freeborn County programs, Judge William Sturtz encouraged Linda to study to become a Minnesota court interpreter. Linda attended the University of Minnesota-Rochester Campus and received her certificate as an official interpreter for the Minnesota Judicial system. She has

(Continued on the next page)

had the privilege of assisting Spanish speakers as an interpreter/translator for the last 15 years, just recently completing her retesting to remain on that roster.

Since 2004 Linda has worked with SEMCAC Community Action Agency as the Cultural Diversity Specialist. SEMCAC serves seven counties in SE Minnesota, working with families to overcome the challenges of language, education, employment or homelessness and other issues often related to poverty.

Around 1999 Linda was selected to participate in the first team from Albert Lea to attend a Blandin Leadership training week. She said she met many wonderful community members during that week and that by the end of the week she felt more validated as a valued community member than ever before. Linda said she's tried to be as welcoming and supportive to community members as people were to her. She especially recalled the support she received from teacher Vern Jensen in her business classes, Eduardo Salcedo who actually came to her home to talk to her parents about college, and Father Russell and others at St. Theodore Catholic Church.

Linda is an active community member. She is a Parish trustee at St. Theodore's, a member of the Board of Trustees of Mayo Health System Albert Lea/Austin Campus, a Board member of the Albert Lea Family Y, a board member of the Freeborn Foundation, current President of Albert Lea TTT Chapter, and a past president of the local Rotary chapter. Linda's involvement extends to many community partnerships and empowering groups that include, but are not limited to, Taste of Heritage committee member, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. annual event committee member, and the county Choose Civility committee. More recently, Linda was appointed by Governor Mark Dayton to the Minnesota Judicial Selection Committee. As a member of that committee she participates in the selection of candidates applying for Judgeships in Minnesota Judicial districts. Linda is past Board Chair of the Minnesota Spanish Speaking Affairs State Council.

Linda's family include son Benjamin and his wife Amanda, who live in Twin Lakes; Adam and his wife Dawn and their daughters Alexa and Lillian, who live in Farmington, and daughter Andrea who lives in New York. Linda's three children all attended and graduated from Albert Lea High School.

(Continued on the next page)

Linda's children have always known since they were very young that going to college was not an "if" but a "when." Linda was always encouraged by her parents to pursue her education and she continued that emphasis with her own children. Benjamin graduated from ALHS and attended Rochester Community College; Adam graduated from ALHS and attended Rochester Community College and Metro State University. Andrea graduated from ALHS and University of Minnesota Duluth and recently completed her masters degree from New York University. The value of education continues as Linda now encourages her granddaughters to pursue their college education when their time comes.

Linda says she has no plans for retirement. She said she feels a renewed joy in her commitment to her career of helping families in our community and the surrounding area. Recalling her feelings at the Blandin graduation ceremony, she said, "I want to take an active part in making Albert Lea equally welcoming for everyone."

