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CONTACT: Amanda Nieto

PHONE: 909-447-2407

Baldwin Park Unified Alumna Discusses Mental Health during Pandemic

BALDWIN PARK – Self-awareness, positive messaging, hugging your family, regular exercise and setting a schedule are key to staying mentally fit during COVID-19, Sierra Vista High School Class of 2001 graduate Silvia Cervantes-Juarez recently shared with more than 100 students at her alma mater.

Cervantes-Juarez, who works as a psychologist at Gladstone High School in Azusa, dispensed words of wisdom and support to students during a 45-minute virtual Flex Friday intervention class presentation on Jan. 22, held in coordination with Sierra Vista's National Alliance of Mental Health (NAMI) Club.

"Give yourself a break," Cervantes-Juarez said. "You are living through a global pandemic. Your parents and older siblings did not go through this in high school. This has not happened to anyone you know ever before. We are living through difficult times and you have to reassure yourself that you are doing your best."

Cervantes-Juarez began the presentation by describing what her family went through after they all became infected with COVID-19 in July 2020. Forced to relocate after their house flooded, Cervantes-Juarez, her husband and their two children moved in with her parents. Though living in close quarters, the family was convinced they were safe.

One Sunday afternoon, Cervantes-Juarez was sitting with her family when she realized she could not smell a big pot of chili her mother was cooking. Shortly thereafter she tested positive for COVID-19. Eventually her mother, father, husband and daughter all tested positive. It was a scary time for the family, but they healed.

"It was scary because we don't know what tomorrow will bring when you're infected," Cervantes-Juarez said. "I know you want to be with your friends and socialize. But if you are carrying COVID-19 and you are asymptomatic, you can spread it to your loved ones, to your grandparents. It's not worth it for just hanging out for 20 minutes with your friends."

Cervantes-Juarez recommended that students post sticky notes with positive messaging and share them with friends and family. She emphasized that students need to take care of themselves or else they won't be able to take care of others.

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Sierra Vista NAMI Club adviser Melanie Graf, who regularly brings in mental health professionals to her Flex Friday classes, including music therapists, frontline workers and educational psychologists, said Cervantes-Juarez provided a critically needed perspective for students from someone who knows their struggles.

“Silvia brings an important perspective to our kids. She is a Sierra Vista Don who is a first-generation high school and college graduate. She’s gone on to have a successful career and was thrilled to come back to tell her story,” Graf said. “The students appreciated her straight talk and it aligns completely with NAMI Club and District goals on staying physically and mentally well.”

Cervantes-Juarez answered a host of questions from students, including whether she felt judged by others for contracting the virus, how long it took for her to get her sense of taste and smell back, how long a break a student should take when feeling stressed and whether it’s true that hugging someone for 11 seconds makes a person happy.

“COVID-19 has upended the lives of so many Baldwin Park families. We are committed as a District to providing every resource to support the mental health and well-being of the community,” Superintendent Dr. Froilan N. Mendoza said. “Our NAMI clubs are doing an amazing job in providing leadership and support to students. We greatly appreciate Silvia for coming back to share her experiences.”

PHOTO

SVHS_Cervantes-Juarez: Sierra Vista High School Class of 2001 graduate Silvia Cervantes-Juarez, who works as a psychologist at Gladstone High School in Azusa, shared words of wisdom and support to more than 100 students during a virtual Flex Friday class presentation on Jan. 22.

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