

LEADERSHIP

Empowering Hispanic Families at Purcell Marian

As the Hispanic Outreach Coordinator, Emma O'Connor's office is her classroom on the first floor of Purcell Marian High School. A small table sits in the corner of the room, strewn with papers, notebooks, a laptop and pens, a dozen or so empty desks are lined in perfect rows. She shifts from classroom Spanish teacher to Hispanic Outreach Coordinator frequently during the day. She checks her cell phone for any missed calls as she waits for a family to arrive. That morning, she is re-enrolling a senior for her final year at the Castle, and translating an IEP (individualized educational plan) meeting for another student.

A father arrives at Purcell Marian for the re-enrollment appointment and in his hands is a large black file folder, documents needed to re-enroll his daughter for her last year at Purcell Marian. Birth certificates, pay stubs, a check book, social security cards, documents a parent keeps for meetings such as these.

The father apologizes in Spanish, "Lo siento" and nervously thumbs through his papers looking for a document.

"No hay problema" O'Connor says patiently.

Emma O'Connor is a joyful woman - full of personality and a genuine smile on her face. If she is overwhelmed by the weight of responsibility she carries for Purcell Marian's Hispanic families, she does not show it. Her role at Purcell Marian is multi-faceted, in 2021-2022 she taught multiple

bells of Spanish during the school day, and also served as the Hispanic Outreach Coordinator, a role she assumed in 2019 when the growing Hispanic student population on campus made it evident that a fluent faculty member on staff available to translate and attend meetings was paramount to student success and parental involvement. It is evident in her interactions with families that meeting the needs of Hispanic students and families she supports clearly brings her joy.

Later that afternoon, Emma joins an IEP meeting for a sophomore at Purcell Marian. Avril, Class of 2024, is a bright student, involved on campus, and in need of some additional reading and language support.

Emma makes the rounds translating the introduction of each member of Avril's support team - to mom, who is fluent only in Spanish. Avril's team is meeting to go over her goals, and progress, and help plan for her future. The meeting is hybrid, there are people in person at Purcell Marian, and a woman on Zoom. The information is quick as teachers and education professionals talk quickly and forms are passed around to sign.

"Hold on" Emma interrupts politely, "Let me explain that." An exchange of Spanish between Emma and Avril's mother pauses the quick pace of the meeting. Mom asks a question to Emma, who in turn, explains what has been discussed. Mom reviews the form she has been asked to sign and finds an error. She shares with Emma that there is an incorrect phone number listed and requests

to fix it before signing. Emma assists with all of this - translating the corrections and ensuring the information is correct from Spanish to English.

Avril is getting all A's and B's this semester, her teacher shares, and has future goals to be a preschool teacher, or an audiologist or a flight attendant to travel the world. Avril has lots of goals for herself, one of which is to go to college.

"My parents came to the United States for me to have a better life than they had, because they didn't have the education that I have now. And, I feel like if I show them that I can do it, then they came here for a



reason, that it was a good choice. Spanish was my first language and I picked up English pretty well as a child. But, I had a hard time also with reading and writing because we would confuse some words. When I was younger, a lot of people would tell me, I wasn't smart enough because I couldn't read or write. When I started getting good grades, I kind of proved them wrong. I just want to get really good grades to get good scholarships. Then when I'm a senior, get accepted to really good colleges and make my parents proud."

"Prior to having an advocate here, one student's mom had never been to campus and never came to these things. And now, because she knows I'll be there, to translate, to welcome her, she comes to everything. FAFSA Night, College and Career Night, Parent-Teacher Conferences, sporting events."

Emma pauses, tearing up briefly. The mother, she explained, was a good mother, but intimidated. While her child was thriving at Purcell Marian, the mom had not completed high school. She only spoke Spanish, and was not able to access the information the school had emailed out. The emails were going to her son's email account and the only computer the family had was his school issued laptop.

"It's so easy for us as teachers to send a quick email and check off our list that we communicated with a parent but, there's more to it than that when it comes to the families Purcell Marian supports whose native language is not English. We're relying on a 16-year-old to share important information about school with their parents." Emma laughs. "As any parent of a teenager could tell you, relying on information solely from a teenaged high school student can leave one with missing information."

O'Connor's role at Purcell Marian ensures that the student can just be a kid. They don't have to translate meetings, or explain the complex college admissions process. The students don't have to fill out paperwork for their parents. O'Connor's work empowers parents in a compassionate way.

"One mother told me last year that her kid was not going to college. She was so stressed, saying we just don't have money for that. I promised that there were ways to make it work if we could meet and talk through it." O'Connor followed through on that promise and worked with Purcell Marian's College & Career Center and CISE Coordinator Kim Farley-Smith. Farley-Smith gathered information about application deadlines, scholarships, and educational grants. As a team, they met with the student and parent, and with Emma translating,



Emma O'Connor and Class of 2022 graduate Francisco and family pose for a photo as he moves into his freshman dorm at Northern Kentucky University. Emma was there to help the family with this major milestone.

the mother was able to understand the resources available for her high-achieving bi-lingual student to attend college. The student was accepted to and offered a full-ride scholarship to University of Cincinnati - Blue Ash and a grant to cover his laptop and textbooks.

As Emma recounted the story, Julie Wilke, Co-Director of the Lavatus Powell program popped in with a student to share good news. Francisco, Class of 2022, had been offered the English Language Learning Foundation scholarship. Emma celebrated with him, gleefully clapping at the accomplishment.

"As a parent myself, it's amazing that we take for granted how involved we are in our kid's lives at school. Going to games, responding to an email from my child's teacher, volunteering to help with something. So many of our Hispanic families have to rely on their teenaged son or daughter to share information with them." Emma continues. "Our families are dedicated to their kids accessing a Catholic education and we aren't like every other school and that's why I am here."

It is evident that this tight-knit community of Hispanic families respect and lean on Emma for advice, support, and advocacy. Purcell Marian has seen continued growth in enrollment from Hispanic families. Of the Class of 2026, 20% of the incoming freshmen are Hispanic. Next school year, Emma hopes to translate more of Purcell Marian's website, newsletters, and retreat information into Spanish. To accommodate this increase in Hispanic families, O'Connor will be working in a full-time capacity as Hispanic Outreach Coordinator, a role she so wonderfully fills at the Castle.

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