

Texas Rose in Late Bloom

Maria Elena Ramirez helps her kids play academic catch-up — while she does the same with her money

Class 1-A at Tom W. Field Elementary is much like most other first-grade units in the Dallas Independent School District. But two factors stand out. First, its 16 students, nearly all disadvantaged immigrants from Mexico and other Latin American countries, come from homes in which Spanish is the main, and often only, language spoken. Second is the woman who guides them through the basics of a U.S. education: Maria Elena Ramirez, who earned her teaching degree while her peers were busy planning their retirements.

Ramirez, 63, who began teaching in 1997, is part educator, part social worker, and part grandma — a combination for which she was well prepared. The youngest of eight siblings whose Spanish-speaking, Mexican-American family moved from tiny Seguin, Texas to Dallas when she was nine, she'd developed a love of learning well before she learned English in third grade. Yet her education took a not-unexpected turn after high school. "Most Hispanic women my age just didn't go to college," she says. "My ex-husband graduated from [Texas] A&M and went to [U. of] Texas Law School. It never occurred to me to go to school too."

Instead, her role was to raise her kids, and she assumed it with characteristic gusto. Today eldest son Tino is in private law practice with his father, Florentino. Mario is an investment and trust consultant for the TIAA-CREF Trust Company. And Eva is, well, her

mother's daughter: Like Maria, she teaches bilingual first graders in Dallas. Indeed, where some moms and daughters swap gossip, these two share lesson plans and teaching strategies.

In hindsight, it all seems according to plan. A voracious reader with a passion for the classics, Ramirez, who divorced in 1982, began taking college courses while working for a large Dallas bank. In 1994, then an administrative assistant for the DISD, she heard about a scholarship opportunity for support personnel. She grabbed it, and she won't forget the day she took home her B.S. in education from Texas Woman's University: "When I walked across that stage, I thought, 'Wow, I may inspire somebody to do what I did.' It's never too late."

The same goes for retirement savings. "Back when, money was not a concern of mine," Ramirez says. But once on her own, she came to realize that building a nest egg was her responsibility. Luckily, she has Mario to lean on for advice — he's helped her balance, for example, the need to take risks with stocks to boost long-term return potential against the need to maintain more stability as retirement nears. Her son has a willing pupil. "I'm really excited about educating myself on this stuff," says Maria. "It's something everybody should learn about. I only wish I'd started 10 years ago." Result: Ramirez has rolled over her former employer's 401(k) into a TIAA-CREF annuity, consolidated

other investments, and is "maxing out" on contributions to a 403(b) — and now can fund a TIAA-CREF 457(b) to boot to supplement the pension she'll eventually receive from Texas' Teachers Retirement System.

Her financial picture in focus, Ramirez has set her sights on another goal: a master's degree in bilingual ed. Audacious? Hardly. For hers is a com-



The smiles in Ramirez's class need no translation.

elling example for students of any age. "All they need is the desire," she says. "Everything else just falls into place." •