



ENCORE

Engaging Communities for College Readiness

Fall 2010

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Engaging Communities for College Readiness (ENCORE) is a comprehensive program developed by Texas Valley Communities Foundation in partnership with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to promote the importance of higher education and college readiness throughout South Texas.

For more information about the ENCORE program, please contact Ernesto Villarreal at encore@tvcof.org or by phone at 956.630.3331

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Edinburg CISD Receives Grant From Texas Valley Communities Foundation

By: Nadia Tamez-Robledo and Ernesto Villarreal

EDINBURG, TEXAS - Amidst applause from an on-looking crowd, Texas Valley Communities Foundation (TVCOF) presented board members from Edinburg CISD with a check for a second consecutive year to fund higher education awareness program that will help students, parents and community across the school district explore the benefits of attending college. The school district was awarded based on its continual efforts to encourage and facilitate students and parents' ambitions to pursue university degrees.

"The grant will help us to continue working with parents for the continued education of the children in the school district and prepare students in middle school for college," stated Rene Gutierrez, Edinburg ISD su-

perintendent. Texas Valley Communities Foundation (TVCOF) awarded Edinburg CISD \$20,000 to bring ENCORE College Readiness Family Sessions to families from six middle schools and 26 elementary schools in late September and early October. The program is aimed at helping parents and students navigate the road to higher education.

"TVCOF supports life-

changing initiatives, through partners such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Wells Fargo Foundation, we are investing in the future of our community by educating students, parents, and community on the importance of being college and career ready," stated Gilbert Maldonado, Chief Executive Officer, TVCOF.

The College Readiness Family Sessions were devel-

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Valley families explore college plans together in ENCORE sessions

By: Nadia Tamez-Robledo

Everyone has heard of the gray house that is as gray as gray can be. Inside, the mother and father watch television and worry about the bills waiting to be paid while their three children sit locked behind their bedroom doors and plug into their mp3 players.

No one talks about college. Mom and dad assume the

school is preparing their children for the university and a successful life, trusting they can handle it on their own.

Without guidance from their family to help them understand the value of an education and prepare for college, the children drop out of high school, enter the workforce immediately after graduation or fail to complete

college.

They have the same struggles as their parents, go on to have families and live in their own gray houses, continuing the cycle.

According to research from the Texas Valley Communities Foundation, students rely more on their parents for guidance on what to do after high school than they do on friends, teachers and counselors.

Through its College Readiness

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Middle school students gain college and career knowledge with ENCORE CAMP

By: Nadia Tamez-Robledo

EDINBURG, TEXAS - Near the chalk outline of a body, forensic investigators pass under the yellow "CRIME SCENE DO NOT CROSS" tape to examine the site. They note the red splatters and particles around the area before taking some hair samples back to their lab a few feet away. Under their microscopes,

other could belong to the assailant, making it a key finding in the case.

This is not the set of a Hollywood crime drama, and these are not professional forensic scientists. They are students at Valley middle schools who got the opportunity to learn about the work of crime scene investigators through ENCORE's Career Awareness and Mentorship



"The students are very engaged...and they're learning. But at the same time, they're having fun."

- Maria Luisa Guerra
Edinburg ISD Asst. Superintendent

they discover two hair colors. They conclude that one belongs to the victim. The

Program (CAMP).

The ENCORE CAMP gets students out of their seats and

into the action with hands-on activities exploring the fields of science, engineering, math and business. CAMP students also learn about the importance and benefits of obtaining a college education.

ENCORE is a program developed by Texas Valley Communities Foundation in partnership with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The ENCORE CAMP initia-

tive was pioneered by Edinburg Consolidated Independent School District Assistant Superintendent Maria Luisa Guerra, which she implemented across six middle schools.

"What we want is to instill in them the interest and also to have the desire to want to complete high school and go into college to get a college

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PSJA ISD receives 2nd College Readiness Grant from TVCOF

By: Nadia Tamez-Robledo

SAN JUAN, TEXAS - ENCORE awarded Pharr-San Juan-Alamo CISD \$10,000 to implement College Readiness Family Sessions, programming designed to help the families of students across the school district understand the benefits of obtaining a higher education.

ENCORE is a program developed by Texas Valley Communities Foundation in partnership with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to promote the importance of higher education and college readiness.

"We are looking forward to this partnership with ENCORE and the Texas Valley



Pictured (from left) - Board Members Gilbert Herrera, Pete Garcia, J. Fernando Lopez, and Ramona Barron; Ernesto Villarreal, ENCORE Program Director; Dr. Daniel P. King, Superintendent; Gilbert Maldonado, TVCOF Chief Executive Officer; Ben Garza, Jr., Board Secretary-Treasurer; and Reymundo Gonzalez, Board President.

Communities Foundation," said Dr. Daniel P. King, superintendent of schools for PSJA ISD. "It goes hand-in-hand with our focus on in-

creasing college readiness among our youth."

Developed by ENCORE, the program highlights the advantages of obtaining a

university degree and provides families with the information they need to become actively involved in their children's academic success. The College Readiness Family Sessions will serve parents from three PSJA middle schools and one high school.

ENCORE awarded PSJA based on the district's record of facilitating access to high education for its students. In 2008, PSJA received a \$10,000 ENCORE grant to develop a parent outreach pilot program at the T-STEM Early College High School, which promotes the importance of rigorous high school courses for college success and gives students the oppor-

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ENCORE brings CAMP to alternative schools around the Valley



By: Nadia Tamez-Robledo

EDINBURG, TEXAS - While he was growing up, Robert Rodriguez was captivated by the by the action of the television series *CSI: Crime Scene Investigations*. The high school sophomore had dreamed of becoming a forensic scientist since before he could remember. One day he would solves crimes and help put wrongdoers in jail like the investigators on T V .

But without knowing where to start, Rodriguez's dream began to wane. He contemplated studying to become a lawyer after he graduated. Maybe he would get job after high school instead.

Rodriguez got the chance to rediscover his dream when Engaging Communities in College Readiness (ENCORE) has partnered up with his school to bring a hands-on career exploration and college readiness CAMP with an agenda that included CSI labs.

"If they hadn't done the

CAMP, I probably wouldn't want to [study forensics] anymore," he said.

ENCORE kicked off its inaugural series of College Awareness and Mentorship Programs (CAMP) with the alternative education organization Information Referral Resource Assistance, Inc. at the Edinburg center.

The week-long CAMP combined an inquiry-based approach to educate learners about the importance of college readiness, the benefits of pursuing higher education, and career opportunities in the fields of math, science, engineering and business.

"[Learners are] working and actually smiling and enjoying themselves, being able to...make a connection between what's being done in the classroom and what's being done in our CAMP," said IRRA Principal Alex Perez. "Kids have come up to me and said they liked it, they wished we could do more of that either on Saturdays or if that could be basically what's done in the classroom."

IRRA CAMP participants

enjoyed two CSI Days, during which they explored how forensic scientists help investigators solve crimes by taking to the science labs and analyzing bone, soil, and hair samples.

"It was pretty interesting how you could find soil samples and study them," 11th-grader Joel Pimentel about the Soil Analysis Lab. "It's helping me a lot because it's giving a lot of different choices of what I can go for in college."

They also explored the basics of entrepreneurship product development by working in teams to brainstorm, design and present their own inventions on Business Day. Learners were mentored by professionals and university students in each field.

"I like it because it's hands-

learners at risk of dropping out of traditional schools or in need of credit recovery earn their high school diploma or GED. In addition to their academic component, the campuses also provide opportunities for learners to gain marketable work skills through its job training programs. As a partner with ENCORE, IRRA learners gained exposure to the career possibilities that college can offer.

"Really, I was [planning to be] a barber or [study] culinary arts, but spending time here in the ENCORE CAMP has made me have a lot of thoughts in my mind of going for something else that could be something of a living," Pimentel said. "I can either go for CSI or robotic engineering or something that I don't deal with that I learned

"If they hadn't done the CAMP, I probably wouldn't want to [study forensics] anymore."

- Robert Rodriguez

IRRA Edinburg

11th grade

on," said Ponciano "Oreo" Ledezma, an 11th grader whose Business Day group designed a self-driving car. "This is a great idea for everybody, whoever likes hands-on technology or mechanics. It was a lot of fun drawing and coloring [our design]."

IRRA charter schools help

here today."

ENCORE is an initiative of the Texas Valley Communities Foundation in partnership with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to promote the importance of higher education and college readiness.

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ENCORE sponsors college trip for middle school girls to Austin for UT campus experience

By: Nadia Tamez-Robledo



AUSTIN, TEXAS - The first flight of the day out of the Harlingen International Airport to the state capital was also the first flight ever for all of the girls selected to represent the Rio Grande Valley at a luncheon with young scientists-in-the-making from across the state.

"I consider myself a very fortunate girl because I had the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to explore, learn about space, engineering and other things, as well," said Maria Loera, eighth grade student from ECISD's Memorial Middle School.

Engaging Communities for College Readiness (ENCORE) facilitated a College Trip for eight Memorial Middle School students to attend the event hosted by Girlstart, an Austin-based foundation that promotes the study of math, science and technology among school-aged girls.

"This college trip experience was a great educational

opportunity for the girls that wouldn't have been possible without the support of ENCORE" Said Arminda Lozano, Edinburg CISD College Readiness Supervisor. "The girls had a wonderful experience that they truly enjoyed."

"They were really excited because it was the first time flying for all the girls, and for most it was their first time being in Austin," said Lizbeth Rivera, a program coordinator for ENCORE.

The eight girls were selected based on their outstanding records of school involvement. First up after landing, was a tour of the Texas Capitol. Then the Girlstart Annual Luncheon and an opportunity to listen to keynote speaker, Sally Ride, who spoke about her career as a scientist and her journey to become the first female astronaut.

"Girlstart also taught us that not only men can pursue ca-

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"They just want someone to believe in them. If I only inspired one person at that event, then my job is done."

- Jermaine Seagears

UTPA basketball player and broadcast journalism major

UTPA basketball player encourages middle school students to dream big at ENCORE CAMP

By: Nadia Tamez-Robledo

EDINBURG, TEXAS - Not every shot was a slam dunk, but that never stopped 22-year-old Jermaine Seagears from stepping on the court. "I want people to know that you can chase your dreams," he said. "It's just a beautiful feeling when you see kids wanting to do something in life. If they want to dance, sing, draw, color, let's support their dreams and aspirations."

The University of Texas-

Foundation.

"It's very important to reach out to the youth, especially in middle school because they're making that transition," he said. "If you don't have any guidelines or mentor or positive motivator, you'll run wild in high school. You need someone to say, 'School's important. Stay focused on your grades. You can have fun, but just keep things balanced.'"

ENCORE conducted a series of hands-

on career exploration activities in the areas of forensic science, robotics, and business through its Career Awareness and Mentoring Program (CAMP) at six

Edinburg mid-



Pan American basketball point guard and broadcast journalism student spoke to 50 students at B.L. Garza Middle School about his experiences overcoming obstacles on his road to college. His presentation took place during a weekend college readiness workshop hosted by Engaging Communities for College Readiness (ENCORE), a program of Texas Valley Communities

was present to give students a first-hand perspective on college life and what it takes to be successful.

"I saw a lot of people struggle for not going to school and not getting a good job," he said. "I wanted to play basketball and I wanted to get an education. I want to make my mom proud. [I've been] able to experience things in

Continued on pg. 7

EISD Grant

(con't. from pg. 1)

oped by ENCORE as a hands-on approach to promoting college awareness among Valley families, giving parents the knowledge and tools they need to guide their children through a successful grade school academic performance and effective college preparation.

"These sessions educate the parents and give them more information about the importance of education in the lives of their children and preparing them to graduate from

Parent Sessions

(con't. from pg. 1)

ness Family Sessions, Encouraging Communities for College Readiness (ENCORE) is helping Valley families learn about the career possibilities higher education can provide while giving parents the knowledge and tools they need to support their children through a successful high school-to-college transition.

Presenters use the story of the gray house, which is a composite of households across the Rio Grande Valley, to stress the need for parental involvement in education.

"These ENCORE Family Sessions are key to establish a college-going culture in our communities," said Ernesto Villarreal, ENCORE Program Director. "We need to continue to work with as many families as we can to promote the importance of setting a college expectation at home."

In September and October, ENCORE hosted six College Readiness Family Sessions for the families of students from six middle schools and 26 elementary schools in the Edinburg school district.

college," said Assistant Superintendent Maria Luisa Guerra. "The ENCORE grant will benefit us greatly."

found that 76 percent of high school students had aspirations of going to college, and parents overwhelmingly pre-

"The grant will help us to continue working with parents ... [to] prepare students in middle school for college."

- Dr. Rene Gutierrez

Edinburg ISD Superintendent

A research study conducted by ENCORE analyzing college readiness among students in the Rio Grande Valley

ferred that their children receive a 4-year degree over entering the workforce after graduation. However, only 15

"It helps us parents get more involved in our children's education," said Catarina Cabrera, who attended ENCORE sessions with his son. "Sometimes we get

pal at Austin Middle School, commented after hosting a ENCORE College Readiness Family Session at her campus. "It doesn't necessarily have to be only the teachers



overwhelmed with work or the other kids, and we don't really focus on that [college preparation]."

Through the interactive programming, families learn the importance of parental involvement in their children's education, the benefits of a college degree, and what it takes to be college ready.

"A lot of times we wait until high school to talk about college when we can start in elementary and middle school," Dalila Garcia, princi-

pal at Austin Middle School, commented after hosting a ENCORE College Readiness Family Session at her campus. "It doesn't necessarily have to be only the teachers

or schools that brings it up but we need the support of the parents as well." According to TVCOF, many parents who were surveyed said they feel that schools adequately prepare their children for higher education. However, they showed high levels of willingness to get involved in promoting students' college readiness, which 80 percent of parents saying they would volunteer at their children's schools and 69 percent saying they would

percent of Valley residents currently have a degree beyond a high school diploma.

Through the College Readiness Family Sessions, parents learn how they can take an active role in preparing their children for college and learn the ultimate benefits of a college education.

"If we are really going to make college readiness something significant here in the Valley, we've got to go out and educate the parents," said one Valley educator. "That's where [real change] will start."

be willing to pay for tutors.

"I want my children to be prepared so they can choose a career," said parent Manuel Rodriguez. "I want them to be prepared and move forward and choose the career they want."

During the activities, families work together to explore what they can do to make sure students successfully enter college after high school and go on to graduate. In addition to reviewing the classroom skills students need to perform well in a university setting, they gain "college knowledge" about the application process, preparing for entrance exams, and learning the value of taking college preparatory coursework.

"He will continue going to ENCORE so he can keep learning what's out there and what they teach," Elizabeth Perez said about her son. "And us, too. We still learn what else we can help him with in the future."

College Readiness Family Sessions will continue in school districts around the Valley throughout the academic year.

Edinburg CAMP (con't. from pg. 2)



degree,” Maria Luisa Guerra said. “The students are very engaged, [experiencing] very much hands-on activities, and they’re learning. But at the same time, they’re having fun.”

On CSI Day, students don medical gear and become crime scene investigators to learn how medical profes-

sionals use bone analysis, soil analysis and fingerprinting to solve crimes. They also have the opportunity to develop a product using real business strategies on Business Day and dive into robotics building and design on Robotics Day.

“The ENCORE CAMP brings dynamic, real-world, hands-on activities where students have fun while they learn about their future careers,” said Ernesto Villarreal, ENCORE Program Director.

ENCORE strives to increase college readiness

among students across the Valley. In addition to initially attending college after high school, ENCORE empowers students and parents with the information and skills they need to ensure that students graduate for college and go on to successful careers.

“I liked it because it shows us stuff that we might not know about these jobs,” said Juan Treviño, an 8th grader at Memorial Middle School who participated in CSI Day. “I learned about all the people it takes to solve just one crime. It gave me ideas for the careers I can have in the future.”

PSJA Grant (con't. from pg. 2)

tunity to earn up to two years of college credit.

“It is critical that parents are well-informed about the importance of a college education for a successful future,” King said. “These parent sessions will provide more tools and information for our parents to use with their children.”

Texas Valley Communities Foundation (TVCOF) believes in building a philanthropic community in the Rio Grande Valley through endowment funds dedicated to charitable and other philanthropic aims with the purpose of creating healthy and productive lives.

“TVCOF supports life-

changing initiatives, such as the enrichment of students, parents and community on the benefits of college and career readiness. We are honored to partner with PSJA ISD, which was recently recognized for its Drop-out Recovery Program,” stated Gilbert Maldonado, Chief Executive Officer, TVCOF.

IRRA CAMP (con't. from pg. 3)

ENCORE has also collaborated with the Ford Partnership for Advanced Studies (PAS) to develop a professional development program aimed at giving instructors the tools they need to help learners become college and career ready.

“It allows them to create a different type of success,” Perez said of the ENCORE CAMP. “[They] create unity within their group, and they’re working toward something, and they feel good about it. Simply, they’re learning and having fun at it.”

Though he was once at risk of forgoing his childhood ambitions altogether, Rodriguez is now looking at Sam

Houston State University and keeping close ties with the ENCORE staff.

“The ENCORE CAMP is reinforcing the importance of education to IRRA learners, that they not only need to focus on completing high school, but prepare for a college education” said Ernesto Villarreal, ENCORE Program Director. “The ENCORE CAMP allows students to learn the benefits of college and career readiness while they participate in academic enrichment hands-on activities, is an exciting experience for everyone.”

“Those five days he was there, I kept asking [CAMP director Dan Garcia] about

colleges and what would be better,” he said. “It (ENCORE CAMP) teaches you more about what studies you can do. I experienced [CSI] a little bit. I really helped a lot because there are things we didn’t really know that much about.”



“[ENCORE] goes hand-in-hand with our focus on increasing college readiness among our youth.”

- Dr. Daniel P. King

PSJA ISD
Superintendent

Austin (con't. from pg. 4)

reers, but women just the same or even better,” Maria said. “I also had the chance to listen to

“It was just a really amazing experience, and I’m so grateful that we got to come.”

- Priscilla Lozano

Memorial Middle School
8th grade

Dr. Sally Ride’s words, which really motivated and meant a lot. I can say this has truly been the most exciting and adventurous thing I’ve ever experienced.”

“The fact that Sally was the speaker caused a big impact because they saw that it is possible for women to accomplish these things,”

Rivera said. “They’re seeing a real life story rather than just something from a movie.”

The group concluded their day by touring The University of Texas at Austin’s mechanical engineering department. Faculty treated the young visitors to a demonstration of lab activities done by UT students, which included having the students try their hand at using design software.

“Right off the bat, it was awesome,” said Priscilla Lozano. “From being on a

plane for the first time to meeting the first American woman astronaut in space to seeing how to create something that is flat on the computer screen [and] transform [it] into a three-dimensional object, it was completely awesome and just a very good experience. I’m really happy that all of us got the chance to be here with the girls from ENCORE and our counselor and principal. It was just a really amazing experience, and I’m so grateful that we got to come.”

Jermaine (con't. from pg. 4)

delivered some bad news – he was cut from the team.

“It was devastating ... but at the end of the day, it was the best thing that happened to me,” he said. “It helped me have a stronger work ethic, humble myself, and be more involved in the church. I said, ‘I got cut. I’m going to leave it up to God, and I’m going to push myself to get better.’”

Seagears resolved to find a way to play on a college team and accepted an offer from Chandler-Gilbert Community College in Arizona. He wouldn’t see his home again for two years, but it was a sacrifice both he and his family were willing to make.

“It’s hard being away, but at the same time, you want to provide great things for [your family] down the line,” he said. “They really motivate me. As long as I hear their voices, it’s all good.”

Seagears’ hard work paid off when he was recruited to play for Team USA Under 20, a group of basketball up-and-comers who compete in an international tournament. Opportunity came knocking again when Seagears got a

college that I would never experience just working a job.”

His words struck a chord with one student.

“He didn’t have a lot of money, and he still went to college,” said seventh-grader Maria Olson. “My family doesn’t have a lot of money, so I want to work hard and get good grades so I can get a scholarship.”

Throughout his speech, Seagears encouraged students to take pride in their individual talents and set their goals high.

“I feel like every person has their unique skills and talents,” he said. “Don’t be discouraged if you feel like you’re not as smart as your friend or you can’t read very well or you’re not talented at sports. Find out what your gift is and follow your dream.”

CHASING THE DREAM

Five years ago, things didn’t look so bright for Seagears’ basketball career. He was in his senior year at Bethesda Chevy Chase High School just outside of his hometown of Washington, D.C. and hoping for a scholarship to play college basketball when his coach

call from UTPA’s Coach Ryan Martin asking if he’d like a chance to play Division I basketball with the Broncs.

“College, for me, has been an eye-opener,” he said. “It’s changed my life for the better, made me appreciate everything, and it helped me grow.”

REACHING OUT

“The CAMP students were very motivated with Jermaine’s story,” said Ernesto Villarreal, ENCORE Program Director. “The mentorship component of the ENCORE CAMPS is critical to the success of the program because students are able to connect education with real-world successful testimonials.”

In the future, Seagears hopes to inspire youth to pursue a college education by sharing his experiences. His presentation resonated with 13-year-old Hilary Castillo, who said he encouraged her to reach for her goals.

“I want to follow his footsteps and focus on my dreams and never give up,” she said.

Seagears’ story also put things into perspective for another student.

“[He got] kicked off his basketball team. I would be crushed if I was kicked off my drum line,” said Michael Garza. “[He fought] through all the struggles and didn’t stop. He did it, and I know I can do it.”

It wasn’t exactly the path Seagears imagined in high school, but he said he wouldn’t change a thing about his journey. Whether he makes it to the big time in basketball or wears a suit and tie to work, he wants to continue working with youth after he walks the stage for his diploma next August.

“They need somebody they can relate to, so I feel like they have a lot of things they want to accomplish in life,” he said. “They just want someone to believe in them. If I only inspired one person at that event, then my job is done, but I felt like I connected with everyone there.”