Antonio Herrera: Leaving Behind A Legacy

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Antonio Herrera can remember the exact moment when he knew he was destined to be a teacher. Now, after 34 years at Grand Valley, he is ready to retire. "I am fulfilled," said Herrera. "I have no regrets."

Herrera has contributed a great deal to the development of the College of Education. He came to Grand Valley in 1972 as a professor of Foreign Languages and then became part of the graduate education faculty.

"I was 15 years old and I knew in my heart I was a teacher."

"Antonio has contributed so much, it is difficult to know where to begin," said Bob Cross, professor of education. "He was instrumental in establishing the ESL program, was involved in the development of the Reading Graduate Program, helped determine the Foundations requirements for the Graduate Programs and played a key role in the COE Governance Process."

Herrera said he is most proud of his involvement in developing the academic master's programs in the mid 1970s. He helped design a curriculum that linked the liberal arts world with the professional world. "This allowed students pursuing a master's degree in education to put an emphasis on music, or math, or history, or biology, or physics," said Herrera. "It was an innovative approach."

Innovative could describe his efforts to create student/faculty exchange programs between Grand Valley and the University of Granada in Spain and with the University of Sarajevo in Yugoslavia.

"I have dedicated my cause to global literacy," he said. "We have student, faculty and research exchange programs with the University of Sarajevo. " President Emeritus Arend D. Lubbers traveled to Sarajevo with Herrera several times, once to give an honorary doctorate to the university president. In the 1980s, Lubbers was made an honorary citizen of Sarajevo.

Herrera is also known for establishing a men's soccer team at Grand Valley in 1972 and coaching the team for 14 years. His passion for the sport began when he was part of a national championship soccer team while earning his bachelor's degree at the Universidad Pedagogica y Tecnologica in Colombia. Herrera has two master's degrees from the University of Oregon: one in bilingual education, the other in international and global education. He also received his doctorate from Oregon.

The road to America and Grand Valley was not an easy one for Herrera. He was born in Colombia in 1939 in the Andes Hills of South.
America. His father came from a long line of peasants. Herrera worked in the fields six days a week from 5 a.m. to 5 p.m. By the time he was nine years old, he was finished with school.

"As the only boy, I was expected to take over for my father," he said. "But I wanted a better life for myself. I broke my father's heart when I left."

Herrera, a self-described survivor, slept on porches and turned to thievery to eat. He soon found work and was able to further his education by winning one of the few government scholarships available. He completed high school and won another scholarship to attend a university. Herrera had to teach elementary students as part of a condition for the scholarship.

"A teacher was the last thing I wanted to be," he said. "I had no choice of career. At 15, I was told to teach first graders the notion of the circumference of a circle. I drew a diagram of circles on a board that incorporated animals. By the time I was done, I had a whole zoo of animals on the board and the kids, 35 of them, just looked at me with amazement. They thought I was everything, the most creative, a magician. "I looked at those children and in my heart I said, I am a teacher. I never questioned that in my 44 years of teaching."

His excellence in teaching has not gone unnoticed. Herrera has received a number of honors including meritorious awards for 25 and 30 years of service at Grand Valley and the Outstanding Service Award for distinguished teaching, leadership and professional service.

Herrera will remain busy in retirement. He is working to create a scholarship for students in San José de Miranda, the village where he grew up. "I want to give another soul the opportunities I was blessed with," he said. "But, there's no reason why they have to take the same route." He will also continue to raise and show his Arabian horses.

Herrera will be missed by his students and colleagues. "It is difficult to imagine attending meetings without his insightful wisdom and emphasis on excellence," said Cross. "Out of all the things I could say about Antonio, the most meaningful to him would be that he has always been an advocate for the students."

"Dr. Herrera is both an outstanding scholar and a passionate teacher," said Faele Mack, professor of education. "He has helped students and faculty understand the issues involved with a diverse nation, and has challenged them to think critically and reflectively regarding their decisions as an educator in a diverse classroom. His laurels will continue to be associated with the initial design of the graduate programs in education. We all must thank Dr. Herrera for his contributions, and now we share them in return."

Herrera will retire from the university in August. "I grew up with Grand Valley," said Herrera. "Coming here was the best decision I ever made, besides leaving home."