

## Community career people take experience to the classroom

By LINDSEY GEMME, Editor | Posted: Thursday, May 23, 2013 1:00 am

Kids got a good look into a variety of possible futures for themselves after about 20 career men and women were invited to talk to middle school students about their jobs last Thursday, for Toltec Middle School's first annual Career Day event.

Toltec Middle School is composed of 460 fifth- through eighth-graders. Career Day is the brainchild of April Ortega, the coordinator for the school's 'GEAR UP' program.

G.E.A.R. U.P. stands for Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs. The mission of GEAR UP is to significantly increase the number of students from low-income families who attend and graduate from college. The goal of GEAR UP are to significantly increase college preparation and college attendance. GEAR UP focuses on increasing high school graduation rates, improving students' academic performance, and increasing knowledge of college options, advantages, access and financing.

Career presenters last week ran the gamut from farmers to deejays, who gave students a good understanding of their job, and how education got them there, and how it impacted their life in general. They were also encouraged to describe their daily job responsibilities, and how they related to what the kids may be learning in school, what rules they have to follow at work and repercussions for not following them, and any advice they may have for kids their age.

"It is crucial for students to make the connections between expectations that they have at school with expectations that will be expected of them in the workforce," Ortega explained.

Some presenters even talked about what kind of students they were like in middle school, what sports, clubs, or organizations they participated in as a kid, and how those experiences helped them in their careers today.

Overall, there were 27 presenters that attended. They included Abbott Nutrition, City of Casa Grande, the president/CEO of Pinal County Federal Credit Union, cosmetologists from Kosmetikos Salon and Day Spa, representatives from Go Daddy and Enterprise, a police officer from the City of Eloy, a fireman from Arizona City, School of Pharmacy professors from the University of Arizona, the Pinal County Health Department, Central Arizona College, Phoenix College, Taylor Holsteins Dairy, U of A Cooperative Extension, Representatives from the Air Force, and Vista Grande JROTC, and representatives from Saving PAR.

Even music artist, motivational speaker, actor and MC Michael Padilla aka MC Dome, waived his usual fee to participate in last week's Career Day event.

Although it was hairy planning her first career day event solo, Ortega characterizes the event as a big success.

“Presenters enjoyed speaking to the students, teachers had a positive experience, and most importantly students were motivated and inspired,” she said.

So inspired, one sixth-grader told her that she “learned a lot of new things” and that the presenters “encouraged me to go to a university and have a good education.” A seventh-grader also liked the different perspectives and points of view the presenters provided for the middle-schoolers.

“To me, all of my hard work paid off because students were able to make the connection that education is valuable and they are motivated and encouraged to go to college and have successful careers,” Ortega commented.

But the icing on the cake for Ortega, she said, was seeing some of her former students come back and volunteer as presenters for the event.

“One former student, Ryan Brashier, is now a fireman in Arizona City. Stephanie Rusiecki, is a student at the University of Arizona studying graphic design. And Eleanna Garcia works at The Alexander Law Offices, PLC in Casa Grande. She is a student at Arizona State University majoring in communication and plans on attending law school upon graduation.

“So as an educator, they are my legacy and it warms my heart thinking about how they were willing to give back to TMS and the community,” she explained.

Ortega is already planning next year’s event, and is looking to form a committee to make it another successful Career Day for Toltec Elementary students.