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Emmy winner thanks Orinda teachers

By Diane Claytor



Estefany Mendez, KPIX 5, receiving an Emmy for the story she wrote, produced and directed about a young Fremont skater Photos provided

Estefany Mendez is living proof that dreams really can come true. As a little girl growing up in Mexico City, Mendez never imagined she could be producing the morning news broadcast at a major English-speaking television station in the sixth largest market in the nation (according to Nielsen DMA rankings). And then, the cherry on the top: winning an Emmy for a story she pitched, developed, produced and directed.

At 12 years old, Mendez, along with her mother and younger sister, left family and friends in Mexico and moved to Orinda, where her older sister was already living. Mendez spoke and understood very little English. "I could say 'my name is Estefany' and I knew colors," she recalls. "In Mexico, I was a top student and here everything was a challenge."

Mendez started fifth grade at Del Rey Elementary, fondly remembering her first teacher, Mrs. Hayes. "I spoke no English and Mrs. Hayes spoke no Spanish so we communicated by using a dictionary and pointing," Mendez remembers.

The family returned to Mexico after that first year because of legalities; they stayed for several years before returning to Orinda. Mendez attended Orinda Intermediate for one year before heading to Miramonte, where she graduated.

It took many years before Mendez actually understood why her mother insisted they leave their homeland. Her father was a journalist and "Mexico is among the most dangerous places for a journalist," Mendez says. "He often uncovered corruption and issues surrounding drugs. If you reported something negative, the government would often go after you and in the '80s, my dad almost lost his life. My mom decided it wasn't safe for us to grow up there."

While at Miramonte, Mendez, who was interested in storytelling, took a video production class. She was hooked. She went to BYU-Idaho and discovered broadcast journalism. Her passion grew. While at BYU, she served as a producer, writer, cameraperson and reporter for the campus newscast. She went on to start the campus' first Spanish-speaking broadcast. Her career path was set.

Her first job was as a video journalist at a small TV station in Park City, Utah, working on feature stories. "That really wasn't my thing," Mendez reports, realizing that she wanted to do serious news stories.

Univision, the largest U.S. television network providing Spanish-language content, had a freelance position open at its Sacramento station. Mendez applied and spent almost four years there, producing, writing and editing. "That's where my broadcasting career really launched," she notes. She was working on "Wake Up Sacramento," and in addition to her regular segments, she had the opportunity to work on special stories. She received her first Emmy for a story she did on undocumented youth who self-deported themselves back to Mexico.

Maria Leticia Gomez, the former longtime anchor at Univision 14 (San Francisco/San Jose), is Mendez's friend and mentor. A call from Gomez gave Mendez her next move up the career ladder. "She told me she thought I was ready to move up to a bigger market," Mendez says. She was right. Mendez spent the next two years at Univision 14, first producing the weekend news and finally the 6 p.m. news broadcast.

Her biggest jump, Mendez says, was about four years ago when she finally had the courage to cross over to English-speaking KPIX 5, the local CBS affiliate. "I was so nervous," she remembers. "I was always self-conscious about my Spanish accent and worrying that people wouldn't understand what I was saying." She's currently working on the morning news show, producing and writing. "The team has been so welcoming and so supportive," she graciously states.

Perhaps her proudest professional moment came recently when she was awarded another Emmy, this one for an English-language piece she did on a young Fremont roller skater. "It was during the pandemic when all the news was so depressing," Mendez says. "I was looking for something different, something uplifting." With 35 stations competing in the "Youth, short term piece" category, Mendez didn't think she had a chance.

Winning this award, Mendez says, shows that "dreams really do come true."

Gracious, generous and humble succinctly describe Mendez. Even after all these years and her many accomplishments, Mendez easily credits her Orinda teachers for much of her success. She remembers their names and their kindness to a young Spanish-speaking girl. Her Miramonte English teacher, Mrs. Plant, particularly stands out. "She helped me so much," Mendez says. "I remember her telling me that I was always working hard and even with the challenges I faced I never gave up. Those words have stuck with me ever since," she emotionally notes.

Following her recent Emmy win, Mendez contacted as many of her Orinda teachers as she could find, thanking them for their assistance. "I think it's important to acknowledge all the help I received," Mendez says. "I am so grateful. These teachers went out of their way to help a student, one who wasn't even from here. If it weren't for them, I know I wouldn't be where I am today. That's why I felt it was so important to reach out to them so they know that their extra time and sacrifice does pay off."



Estefany Mendez standing outside the KPIX 5 studio in San Francisco

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