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Local News - Thursday, April 8, 2004

Conference inspires Hispanic students

By GISELLE SOTELO

Staff Writer; gsotelo@thedailyjournal.com

VINELAND -- Listening to Carlos Ojeda Jr.'s inspirational story can make you believe in the power of sheer determination.

According to Ojeda, those who were supposed to encourage him -- his teachers -- said he would never amount to anything.

But Ojeda, 28, proved them wrong.

Near the end of his speech Wednesday at the 16th annual Hispanic Student Leadership Conference at Cumberland County College, Ojeda rattled off a laundry list of accomplishments, hoping to inspire others.

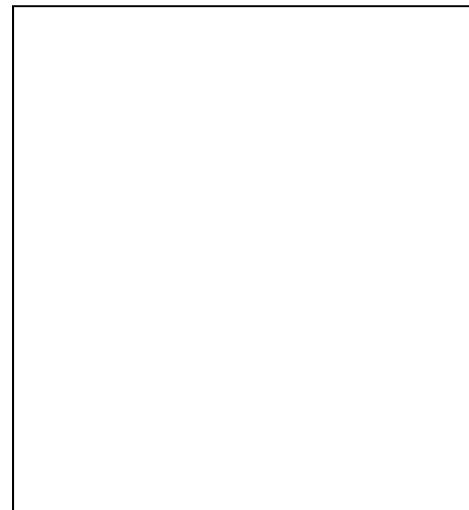
It worked.

"That Carlos guy, he inspired me to be something," said Jade Andino, 17, a senior at Vineland High School. "You've got to believe in yourself."

That's exactly the reaction event organizer Lucy Acevedo hoped would occur.

The conference was intended to equip students with the primary tool that's necessary for success: motivation.

College students and juniors and seniors in Cumberland County public schools were invited.



Staff photo/Charles J. Olson

Carlos Ojeda Jr., founder and president of Distinct Communications, was the keynote speaker during the Hispanic Student Leadership Conference at CCC.

About 200 people attended, including Vineland, Millville, Buena Regional and Cumberland Regional students.

They listened to the advice of a handful of speakers -- a welcome novelty for many who don't hear such encouraging messages at home.

Some Hispanic parents lack the educational skills to inspire their children to further their own schooling, said Diana Appel, administrative assistant for enrollment services at CCC.

"They don't know how to teach kids to aspire to pursue educational goals because they don't have that themselves," she said.

That's when other successful Hispanics -- such as Ojeda -- can be a resource.

Ricardo Reyes, 17, a junior from Vineland High School, first considered the conference an easy way to get out of class. Ultimately, however, he admitted Ojeda's story touched him deeply.

Andino looks to those such as Jennifer Lopez as her role model.

"Being Spanish, people look at you different," she said. "But then you find out there are many strong Latinos and Latinas out there that are inspirational to you."

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