

Forum fires up students

By T. KEUNG HUI, Staff Writer

RALEIGH -- Pegine Echevarria is a survivor -- growing up in a drug-ridden, gang-plagued part of the Bronx forces you to adapt.

Her childhood was tougher than those experienced by most of the more than 650 teens who gathered Friday for the fifth state Hispanic Educational Summit at N.C. State University's McKimmon Center. But the message from Echevarria was clear -- if she can prevail, so can other Hispanic youngsters.

"It takes having a dream, being persistent and making it happen," Echevarria (pronounced Etch-uh-vah-RI-a) told the students. "It's for that reason I'm not dead. I should have been a drug addict, been stabbed, had 25 kids -- statistically -- or divorced. It's about you saying, 'I'm worth it.' "

Echevarria, the summit's keynote speaker, revved up the teens, who came from more than 30 school districts for the largest annual gathering of Latino students in the state.

She told them how she allowed her anger to get the better of her growing up. She was mad about being reared by a single mother and living in a neighborhood where her 16-year-old sister died of a heroin overdose. After joining a gang and being thrown out of two high schools, Echevarria decided to turn her life around and stop blaming her teachers.



Estefani Hernandez, left, and Anabel Monter of Siler City's Jordan Matthews High School fill out questionnaires during the fifth state Hispanic Educational Summit in Raleigh.

STAFF PHOTO BY TRAVIS LONG

"If you have a boring teacher, stand up," Echevarria said, drawing a "yes" from most of the students. "Here's something important for you to know -- so what? Your teacher is not going to live your life. You have to."

One of Echevarria's books is being used by Girl Scouts USA as the group's handbook for mentoring girls. Hispanic Business Magazine named her one of the top two motivational speakers of Hispanic descent in the nation, and she appears on local and national television shows.

Students left the speech pumped up for a full day of workshops.

"She's great," said Joeliz Roldan, 16, a junior from Tarboro High School. "She opened people's minds to look for their dreams."

The conference was intended to be a boost for Hispanic students, some of whom enter the United States with poor English skills and struggle with tests.

A lot on offer

Students had a variety of activities to choose from at the conference, which was sponsored by the N.C. Society of Hispanic Professionals. Topics included learning how to prepare for high school and college, the dating game and careers in engineering, accounting and the military.

"What's great about this is the students will go home and share this information with their friends and family," said Tonya Scott, Apex Middle School's curriculum coordinator.

Monica Perez, 17, a sophomore at Jordan High School in Durham, took advantage of an exhibit room full of representatives from businesses, colleges and scholarship organizations.

"It's great for me," she said, noting that she hadn't gone to her own school's college fair. "I've been able to learn more."

Issues involving Hispanics have become major topics in North Carolina recently. The U.S. Census Bureau estimated the state's Hispanic population to be about 444,500 in 2002 and growing rapidly.

At one workshop, a handful of the 40 students indicated they were born in the United States, with many coming from the Dominican Republic and Colombia.

In an environment where Spanish was spoken as much as -- if not more than -- English, the conference was a welcome place for many students.

"It's good," said Karen Ostia, 13, a seventh-grader at Carroll Middle School in Raleigh. "You don't see so many Hispanic students at school."

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