

# Personal experience fuels CMC grad's desire to teach immigrants

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By Mike McKibbin

CARBONDALE — An immigrant to the U.S. from Mexico when she was 8 months old, Kenia Pinela grew up in Carbondale and graduated from Roaring Fork High School with a strong passion for teaching children and helping other immigrants.

Now she plans to carry that passion into the next stage of her life.

At Saturday's bachelor's commencement ceremony at Colorado Mountain College Spring Valley, Pinela will receive a Bachelor of Arts in education with a dual endorsement in elementary education and culturally and linguistically diverse education. She will also be the student speaker.

More than 1,000 students are receiving degrees and certificates from Colorado Mountain College this week, at 10 different graduation ceremonies held throughout the CMC district.

"After I graduated from high school, I wanted to either study psychology or teach kids," Pinela said. "CMC was a great option for me so I could stay local to go to college. And I was able to get some scholarships to help pay for two years."

Pinela, a first-generation college student and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals recipient, said she wanted to either help area low-income immigrant families or teach at a local school.

She works at the nonprofit Valley Settlement in Carbondale, which helps Roaring Fork Valley immigrant families with early childhood development, advancing opportunity and reducing barriers to community resources.



Kenia Pinela, second from left, was one of four CMC students honored at the state capitol in 2017 at the Colorado Aspiring Educator Honor Roll ceremony. Here, Pinela is with (holding the CMC flag) Dr. Kim Hunter Reed, executive director of the Colorado Department of Higher Education. They are joined by Pinela's fellow CMC teacher education classmates, faculty and Dr. Katy Anthes, Colorado Department of Education commissioner.

"I think my degree really fits the needs of immigrants," Pinela said. "I'll be teaching some of the most vulnerable community members and, as an immigrant, I know what matters the most."

During her last two years at CMC, Pinela gave two presentations at educational conferences on how to reach culturally diverse students and families. One was at Sonoma State University in Sonoma, California, and the other at the University of Texas-El Paso.

"There have been studies that show when you bring cultural assets into a school, the students learn better," Pinela said. "And you also work on parent engagement by showing them how they can support their child in school."

Pinela added she plans to make a third presentation this year on how to communicate with families that have experienced trauma.

Divorce and neglect can lead to traumatized families, as can natural disasters such as fires, she said. Migrant families can also experience trauma when parents and children are forced to live apart during legal proceedings, some that may result in deportation of one or more family members.

Pinela conducted a research project on trauma families and made 23 home visits with Crystal River Elementary School students and their families.

Pinela's teaching approach placed her on the 2017 Colorado Aspiring Educator Honor Roll overseen by the Colorado Department of Education and Colorado Department of Higher Education.

She said her four years at CMC have been a blessing. "I can't say enough about the quality of care and support CMC instructors provide," she said. "And that's to each and every student. I'm grateful for the chance to stay in my local community and learn instead of sitting in a 300-student lecture hall somewhere. It's been great."

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