

CHANGING LIVES IN THE CLASSROOM

To Mikki Gil, a passionate Puerto Rican from New York City, great relationships spell success in and outside the classroom. So when she came to VU from a major post in the Orange County educational community, she set out to create a vibrant community of students and professors.

“Coming here was a consolidation of my strengths and backgrounds,” Gil says. “I really believed that I could help build a system that produced excellent teachers,”

She became one of the key architects of VU’s graduate program in education, which secured three different accreditations in a row and today is considered a jewel by the educational community.

To Gil, it shows the success of the relational philosophy of training teachers for the classroom — a philosophy that goes back to her childhood.

Gil was born in Puerto Rico and raised in multi-cultural Manhattan, attending the influential Glad Tidings Tabernacle Assembly of God church where she learned from her pastor and mentor, Marie Brown. There, she saw how learning was accomplished through personal interaction within a loving community.

“In our Puerto Rican household, when all was said and done, we knew life was about relationships with significant people in our lives,” she says. “My picture of Jesus is that of a teacher teaching within a relational context, from the time He was a boy in the tabernacle. It’s much more powerful than just talking at people. Christ told us to go out and be fishers — doers, connectors. That was very much modeled in my home and in my church.”



She met future husband Vince (now a VU professor of anthropology) while working for Teen Challenge in the ministry’s early years, and they married and left New York in 1968. Vince, a student, had transferred to VU.

“Coming here was very much a prayer-destiny for us,” she says. “There was an anticipation that God was preparing to use us to impact lives. We had tremendous expectations.”

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But rural Orange County took some getting used to. The familiar rhythms of city life were gone, they had no relatives west of the Hudson River and Mikki, a true New Yorker, didn't know how to drive.

VU became their family. She went immediately into teaching, and would eventually devote 26 years to the OC public school sector. By 1973 both Gils were enrolled in UCLA's MA and Ph.D. programs, but they had one car, a new baby and full-time jobs. The logistics, she says, were mind-boggling.

But it paid off in the classroom.

"I began to see how God used my studies to touch lives in the classroom," she says. "I loved working in Santa Ana with bi-cultural populations."

She finished a second MA in 1981 and her Ph.D. in social science at UCI in 1987, and went on to become a high school principal. When she was offered the chance to direct VU's graduate education program, Gil felt God had something special in store.

Indeed, since she came to VU in 1995, Gil has put her personal touch on the training of hundreds of teachers.

"My passion is impacting lives, and the best way is through collaborative learning and not just papers," she says. "You have to have conversations, and those dialogues become the catalyst for emotional and intellectual growth. One of my greatest delights is to talk with my MA students because I strongly believe I'm training future leaders."

Gil spent her first years at VU creating the curriculum, procedures and culture that support the reproduction of good teachers. She feels a special sense of accomplishment at having helped establish a well-respected program, which continues today under the leadership of director Jeff Hittenberger. As a professor of education and anthropology, Gil's energy now goes



Gil at Century High School with VU-bound seniors Ana Angeles (left) and Guadalupe Leyva. Gil was instrumental in helping them receive full-tuition, renewable VU TEACH scholarships. "My passion is impacting lives," Gil says.

toward turning MA students into full-fledged "teacher-researchers."

"After students get their credential, they come to me and I get the last crack at them," she says.

Together, they embark on what Gil calls "a journey" through educational methods and research implementation in the classroom. She drills them on the new language of quantitative and qualitative methodology and data analysis for applied research.

"Teaching is not about a bag of tricks," she says.

"There's artistic talent involved, and it's about being equipped with appropriate tools [to

help individual students learn in the way best suited to them]. There's tremendous variation within the human capacity to learn. So teaching involves hard work."

Gil may be impacting more lives today than when she was teaching in Santa Ana, in classrooms at VU and in the community at large. Both her daughters, Rachel and Debra, are graduates of the VU program and teach in Orange County public schools.

When she has time for herself, Gil travels and dabbles in real estate. In the middle of it all, she feels God leading "in every aspect of the way," just as when she first arrived in Costa Mesa in '68 with the prayer that God would use a transplanted, bi-cultural New Yorker to make a difference in other's lives. 🙏