



"Yes, I Can Do This!"

For the 120 kids enrolled in the Summer Discovery program sponsored by La Plaza Inc. in Indianapolis, Fridays are field-trip days. Destinations vary – a dairy farm one week, the Indianapolis Zoo the next – but when Lydia Salinas heard that a visit to Ball State University was on the agenda, she had her doubts. "Mommy, why do I have to go to college? I'm only 8!" she asked.

"I told her that she would be going to college soon enough, so she might as well learn about it now," recalls Emily Salinas, a third-generation Mexican-American who has taught English, Spanish and Latino studies to public school youth and Summer Discovery participants. "Many of the students that La Plaza serves are either immigrants or the children of first-generation immigrants," says Salinas. "La Plaza's work focuses on helping kids figure out their interests, develop their skills and set goals for the future."

A field trip to a college campus sends a positive message, according to Miriam Acevedo Davis, president and CEO of La Plaza. "It shows them the do-ability of post-secondary education; it says that it's within their reach. Yes, they'll have to work hard, and yes, there will be challenges, but we want them to start thinking at an early age: I can do this. It's possible."

Staying in the loop

La Plaza, which celebrated its 10th anniversary in 2014, is among the 155 Marion County organizations that received grants from the Summer Youth Program Fund, a collaboration of Lilly Endowment and nine philanthropic partners. In 2014 the Fund partners awarded more than \$2.3 million to support programs that blend academic activities with enrichment experiences. Many grant recipients are based in low-income neighborhoods, close to the families they serve. Program content varies but typically reinforces what students have learned during the school year. This "keeps them in the loop for when they return to the classroom in the fall," explains Aisha Shaw, whose two children, both honor roll students, have attended back-to-back Summer Discovery programs. "They loved it," she says. "I plan to enroll them next year as well."

Because Summer Discovery is limited to students in grades one through six, La Plaza created a second summer program, the Leadership Institute for Latino Youth (LILY), for students in grade seven and beyond. Also supported by an Endowment grant, LILY addresses La Plaza's top strategic goal: to increase the number of Latino students who complete high school and pursue post-secondary education. Program participants entering 11th and 12th grades are called "ambassadors" and concentrate on mapping the path that will take them to their chosen careers. They learn about college admission requirements, scholarship opportunities, portfolio preparation and internships. They fill out financial aid documents, visit companies, interact with community leaders and engage in job shadowing.

"Education is paramount for our families," says Davis. "It's the best vehicle for moving up the economic ladder."

Overcoming obstacles

There are obstacles along the way, of course, but there also are numerous victories to celebrate. These are most evident in April when La Plaza hosts its annual Night of the Americas dinner and recognizes its college-bound scholarship recipients.

"The vast majority of the winners are kids who have come through our educational programs," says Davis. "We know them from Summer Discovery and from LILY. To see these young people who started with us as grade school students and now are graduating at the top of the class and are going on to become engineers or teachers or accountants...that's when we know we've done what we set out to do. That's when we know we've accomplished our mission."



Elementary school students find summer fun and academic enrichment through La Plaza's Summer Discovery program, which met in 2014 at Gambold Preparatory, an Indianapolis Public Schools magnet high school (opposite, below).

