



## Rivera, Amanda



Amanda Rivera

Looking back now, it's hard to believe that Reilly Elementary Assistant Principal Amanda Rivera almost dropped out before starting high school. She didn't like school, her teachers weren't supportive, and she didn't make friends easily. But her father, who quit high school to care for his family, would have none of it. He not only stressed the importance of a good education, but also being a responsible and respectful person. He impressed this upon his children so well that eight of her ten siblings graduated college, and Amanda went on to earn three master's degrees.

Amanda became an educator because she wanted to help students, and improve things she didn't like about her own education. She loves her work, saying, "it's not easy, but it's meaningful because I can see how I'm making a difference in students' lives." She started her teaching career with a brief stint at Reilly before going to Funston Elementary. While at Funston she started meeting with other teachers around ways to get parents more involved in the schools. They worked with LSNA to develop a holistic plan, looking at the key components that make a quality school community. They also addressed overcrowding, and the need to open up schools as

community learning centers. With LSNA, they then collaborated with other Logan Square schools and COFI (Community Organizing and Family Issues) to develop the Parent Mentor program. In this program, parents are brought into schools, and trained in supporting their children in the classroom and how to work with teachers. It has been very successful, replicated in other city school districts across the country.

After 18 years at Funston Amanda's career took a dramatic turn. LSNA helped get Ames Middle School built to relieve overcrowding, and she was tabbed to be the Assistant Principal. This was a huge endeavor, as she had to painstakingly build the school from the ground up - hire staff, develop the curriculum, and deal with parent and student issues. She took advantage of her Parent Mentor experience, making sure there was a strong Local School Council and quality parental involvement. She joined forces with students, staff members, parents, police commanders and three different aldermen. She remembers, "Working with all these people was not easy, but LSNA was the glue that helped organize, develop agendas and talk about what was important." Opening Ames was the hardest thing Amanda has ever done, but it was also very gratifying. She met many smart, committed people who came together to provide support and serve as partners.

Amanda has seen a lot of positive changes in her 32 years in the community. Development has led to improved housing and better businesses. The community is safer and the quality of schools has improved. She credits LSNA for many of these changes, and thinks "every community should have an organization like it, one that helps create community and helps people become responsible contributors." At the same time, there is room for improvement. She would like to see a greater equity of resources, pointing out, "There are not enough social service agencies. There is a big need for mental health and family counseling, as well as opportunities for Latinos to learn English."

Amanda is a Buddhist, and her philosophical beliefs drive who she is as an educator and a person. She says a hero is a person who is ethical, and courageous enough to speak out about important issues. Her hero is Daisaku Ikeda, an international Buddhist leader. "He walks the talk. He meets with world leaders, and dialogue about peace, culture and education. This enriches us, empowers us, and makes us better humans. Education is every day, for life, and the more you know, the more value you can create." Through Buddhism, and LSNA, Amanda is enriched, and always learning.

### Logan Square Neighborhood Association

2840 N. Milwaukee Avenue Chicago, IL 60618 Phone: (773) 384-4370 Fax: (773) 384-0624

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