



## ALUMNAE RETURN TO DAVIS TO GUIDE STUDENTS

### Three grads eager to start class on Monday

By BETTY L. MARTIN  
*Houston Chronicle*

Three recent graduates of Jefferson Davis High School must have really enjoyed their years as Panthers.

Olga Soto, Valerie Gallegos and Leticia Sanchez have returned to the campus at 1101 Quitman St. and are busily preparing for the arrival of students on Monday, the first day of classes for the 2008-09 school year.

Soto and Gallegos are returning to Davis as first-year teachers, while Sanchez is the school's new college access coordinator.

They will be sharing the hallways and teachers' lounge with Davis educators who taught them in their high school days. There are even a few veteran teachers who inspired them in their chosen career paths.

All three say that coming back to the high school they knew as students is a way to repay that debt -- and to pass on the legacy of love for education to future generations.

"I was shy and language was a problem in the ninth grade, when I had barely just arrived from Mexico," said Soto, 24, who will teach algebra and two classes of English as a second language.

#### Finding support

"I got married and got pregnant in high school," she added, "so it was more difficult for me. But when I was struggling and at risk of dropping out, I had a lot of support."

Ruth Kravetz, a Davis calculus teacher, was there to

help, Soto said.

"She really helped me and supported me. She saw potential in me," Soto said. "Teachers and (now Principal) Jaime Castañeda went the extra mile for me and I want to pay them back."

Soto graduated Davis in 2002, earning four years of college scholarships from Project GRAD (Graduation Really Achieves Dreams) Houston.

She received her bachelor's of science degree in applied mathematics from the University of Houston-Downtown in 2007.

She and her family -- her husband, a boilermaker, and their 5-year-old daughter and 18-month-old son -- live near Little York and Interstate 45.

"I want to help students who are struggling, who don't look forward to the future. They're the main reason why I came back to teach," Soto said.

The 26-year-old Sanchez was another recipient of four-year \$2,000-per-year Project GRAD Houston scholarships matched by UH-Downtown.

She's enthusiastic about her new job at Davis because she will be able to help students hook up with funding to continue their education beyond high school.

A 2000 Davis graduate, she got her bachelor's degree in communications from St. Mary's University in San Antonio.

Sanchez was at the University of Texas in San Antonio, pursuing a master's degree in bicultural studies,



PANTHER SPIRIT: OLGA SOTO, left, LETICIA SANCHEZ and VALERIE GALLEGOS are Davis High School graduates who have returned to the school, 1101 Quitman. Soto and Gallegos are first-year teachers, while Sanchez is serving as the new College Access Coordinator. (PHOTO: Pin Lim, *The Houston Chronicle*)

when she worked as an enrollment services officer in UT's finance department.

The post made her feel more comfortable in an educational setting. She decided to teach and returned home to north central Houston.

#### Preparing for college

Her job at Davis will have her visit parents, make agreements with students about attending college and help students prepare through pre-college testing and completion of requirements.

She will then assist them in the application process.

"I am going to make sure they know about scholarships -- not just Project GRAD, but any others that can help them," Sanchez said. "It's available, all you have to do is know it's there."

"My students are going to be aware."

Gallegos, 25, also graduated Davis in 2000 and attended four years of college funded through Project GRAD Houston.

She earned a bachelor's degree in mathematics from the University of St. Thomas in 2004.

"Project GRAD is a wonderful program and it really does help students achieve dreams," Gallegos said. "My dream was always to be a teacher."

The advantages of teaching in the same school she attended for four years, Gallegos said, is that you can remain in a community you know, "inside your comfort zone."

She said, though, she is aware that such familiarity can reduce one's ability to see students objectively.

"You may tend to be too lenient because you know where the students are coming from because you came from exactly where they are from, too," Gallegos said.

"I'm just excited to get the chance to come back -- and give back -- what I was given."

Soto said it is good to be back at Davis.

"It brings back good memories," she said.