**Making a Connection: Alex Sarabia, M.A., LPC**

“What do you want to be when you grow up?”

There are a lucky few of us who have always known the answer to that question. Alex Sarabia is one of them. Now a psychology instructor at South Texas College, his passion for teaching began at a young age and has never wavered.

“I had a little blackboard when I was a kid, and I used to gather the neighborhood kids, my cousins, anyone who was around, make up lessons and give them tests,” he recalls.

Sarabia himself was the kid that teachers loved to teach. He was an eager student, and graduated from Roma High School as valedictorian while taking classes at South Texas College. That’s where he encountered his first psychology class. “I fell in love with the subject,” he says. All of the classes he took while still in high school allowed him to graduate with his associate’s degree in psychology just one year after finishing high school.

After that, it was off to the University of Texas-Pan American (now the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley). “With my grades, I could have gone to college elsewhere, but we are a very close-knit family so I didn’t want to go too far from home. And I quickly realized that I could get the same high quality education here. I don’t regret my decision to stay local one bit,” he says. He graduated at the top of his class with degrees in psychology and sociology.

**Combining Teaching and Psychology**

“I knew I loved to teach, and I had become very interested in the field of psychology, so becoming a professional counselor and instructor was a natural fit,” he says.

Fulfilling the requirements for his master’s degree and license in counseling (LPC) required completing many supervised clinical hours. Sarabia practiced at Abundant Grace Counseling Center in Edinburg, where the majority of his clients were suffering from depression, anxiety or substance abuse, and at Doctors Hospital – Renaissance in the inpatient psychiatric unit. Many of the patients were diagnosed with schizophrenia or were suicidal. “Often, they would share stories of being abused, or would cut themselves. It was very difficult at first.”

His real-world experience is something Sarabia channels every day in his South Texas College classroom, where he has been teaching for eight years. Coincidentally his older brother, Eli, is also a psychology instructor at South Texas College. In fact, the two co-chair the Starr County Psychology Club, an organization designed to stimulate interest in the field of psychology among students while engaging them in community service and social activities.

“We invite experts to come and talk to students about suicide, substance abuse, and positivity, and have scheduled talks by well-known local celebrities, like boxing champion Panterita Figueroa Jr. and his brother, Brandon,” adds Sarabia. The club is one of the most active groups on campus, and was recently honored by the city with the Star Community Service Award for its contributions to the local community.

“The psychology program is growing, and that’s very gratifying to us,” says Sarabia. Following in his footsteps, students can earn their associate’s degree at South Texas College, and then continue their education at a four-year school to earn a bachelor’s and/or master’s degree. Even those students who don’t stay in the field of psychology say that they find their studies helpful as they go on to study other things.

**A Teacher Students Can Relate To**

As is often the case at South Texas College, the lives of the instructors mirror those of their students. Like the majority of his students, Sarabia is of Latino descent, and was born, raised and educated in the Rio Grande Valley area. His commitment to the community is evident in his choice to stay in the Valley for both his education and his work. His passion for teaching, combined with his experience in practice and his ability to relate to his students, make him the kind of teacher that everyone wants to have.

“I’ve learned from my students [that] they have very busy schedules, especially since many of them work while taking classes,” he says. “I try to be flexible. Most are very motivated to do well, and older students are particularly determined not to waste time.”

Sarabia works closely with students in Starr County and participates in local elementary, middle and high school career days. He’s also a co-host of the YouTube show “Talk the Talk: Rio Grande Valley Stars,” a series that gives voices to successful, creative people from the Valley and showcases them as role models for youth in the community.

Students often come to Sarabia for guidance on issues ranging from school work to relationship problems, depression, or substance abuse. In those moments, he’s quick to point out that he has to temporarily hang up his therapist’s hat. “I can certainly give general advice, but more than that is not appropriate,” he notes, adding that he can refer them to a therapist if the situation warrants it. He’s proud that he can be a positive resource for students.

“If I can impart anything to my students, it’s this: Never give up,” says Sarabia. “Surround yourself with positive, supportive people, and don’t be afraid to ask for help. Take advantage of the resources available to you on campus, and find role models.”

That, he says, is the secret to success, regardless of the field you’re in.