

Erika Perez: Teaching students to make a positive difference

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Erika Perez is a member of Iglesia Bautista Jerusalem in Pharr, Texas. She is a lecturer at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley and a licensed professional counselor. From deep in the heart of one Texan, she shares her background and thoughts on being a follower of Christ in the marketplace. To suggest a Texas Baptist leader in the marketplace to be featured in this column, or to apply to be featured yourself, [click here](#).

Background

I wake up every day with the goal of helping first-year students to be successful in college. My passion is to see students live out their purpose in life. I also am striving to launch my own private counseling practice this month in order to help meet the mental health needs of our community.

What other roles have you been in, and what were your positions there?

Prior to teaching, I served as an academic adviser for student athletes on campus. My role was to provide academic guidance to student athletes as they progressed through their plan of study and to ensure they were compliant with NCAA guidelines.

I also dedicated a year to serve in the local Baptist Student Ministry, where I helped lead freshman initiatives within the organization as well as provide support with outreach and activities.

Where did you grow up?

I call the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas home. This is a border region separating Mexico from the United States. While growing up, I was raised in McAllen and Pharr. I now live in Edinburg.

How did you come to faith in Christ?

I was invited by a teammate to attend Iglesia Bautista Jerusalem in Pharr 14 years ago during a high school soccer practice. It took two invitations before I was convinced to attend, given that I grew up Catholic. I was skeptical about attending a new church and was concerned whether my mom would allow me to attend a different church. After addressing this with my mom and asking her for her permission, she encouraged me to go.

I attended the Wednesday Youth Night, and for the first time in my life, I felt I found the truth—the truth about Jesus. I connected with the church and gave my life to Christ a month later. Since that Wednesday Youth Night, I haven't stopped attending and serving within the church.

Where were you educated, and what degrees did you receive?

I graduated with my Bachelor of Arts in Psychology and my Master of Education in Counseling and Guidance from the University of Texas Pan American, now called the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley.

Life in the marketplace

Why do you feel called into the marketplace?

The first job I ever had was at the university. I loved my experience and the roles that staff and faculty play in impacting students' lives. I knew I wanted to stay in this environment and do the same.

Working at the university feels like home. I have opportunities to grow professionally, be creative and contribute to the educational experience of first-year students. I always feel challenged to do and be better.

How does being a Christian influence your decisions in the marketplace?

My faith helps me believe and be optimistic about people because I know there is a God who can transform people's lives and use their lives for his glory.

When I walk into the classroom, my hope is that I teach students to think about their purpose in life and how they can use their life for the service of others. I challenge students to think, do and grow. I want students to take an active role in their life and to make positive contributions to our community at every stage of their life.

What is your favorite aspect of the marketplace? Why?

My favorite part about working in higher education is when students find value in who they are, what they do and what they believe. It is important to me that students find meaningful ways to make their lives count and be of impact to others. I believe if young adults are intentional about how they live, then we will have a ripple of positive change in our world.

What one aspect of the marketplace gives you the greatest joy?

Seeing transformed and engaged lives. I enjoy seeing how students walk away with a new sense of awareness of who they are, what they believe and what they can do. I believe this can impact the trajectory of their lives and their contributions to the community in which they live.

What one aspect of the marketplace would you like to change?

I want young people to know they do not have to be afraid of hard work. For positive changes to occur, we need commitment, responsibility and resilience. We need to endure and work hard in the journey in order to impact change.

How has your place in the market or your perspective on the marketplace changed?

I believe young people need, more than ever, more people who are in their corner. Students need to feel someone cares about them, believes in them and is ready to invest in them. With the rise of mental health needs and suicides in this young generation, we need to ensure individuals are pouring life into the lives of young people.

About Erika

Other than the Bible, name some of your favorite books or authors, and explain why.

I really enjoyed reading *Designing Your Life* by Bill Burnett and Dave Evans. This book is built on the premise that a “well-designed life is worth living.” This well-designed life begins at the inner core of who we are and how this core drives our beliefs, behavior and purpose as we seek to answer the tough questions in life. As these questions are answered, it helps the reader find meaning, control and purpose in the life they seek to live.

What is your favorite Bible verse or passage? Why?

2 Corinthians 12:9 (NKJV): “And he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness.’”

I've taken hold of this Bible verse since the time I served as a missionary in Venezuela. While I was in Venezuela, I was bitten by a spider. I was in severe pain and had to be taken to the hospital. I struggled with an infection for 15 days. During this time, I had to settle for God's grace and the work he was doing through my weakness. I had to remind myself that God was good in spite of the pain he allowed me to experience.

Who is your favorite Bible character, other than Jesus? Why?

Paul the Apostle, because he was straight forward, bold and led with conviction. I wish I was as courageous and confident as Paul was.

Name something about you that would surprise people who know you.

My inner circle knows this: I once participated in a talent component of a competition. I said my talent was dancing samba. I had never danced samba before but felt I could learn quickly. I obviously did poorly. It was embarrassing yet fun.

What words of wisdom or inspiration would you like to share with young people?

Be yourself. Be active in the church. Don't expect people to serve you, but make your life about serving others. Don't ask, "What's in it for me?" when it comes to serving, but ask, "How can I serve others?"