Diana Lam '69

BE BOLD

"Your life should not be determined by your zip code," Diana Lam ’69 once told the Christian Science Monitor.

In the city in which she works, 42% of high-school students do not make it to graduation. “That irritates me, angers me, gets me going,” she said “Sometimes I hear that we can’t do any better with these kids, and I think, ‘Wait...I was one of these kids.’”

Diana grew up in Lima, Peru, in a humble home; her parents educated through sixth-grade. Diana came to Saint Ben’s at 17 thanks to good grades and scholarships. While interested in education, she didn’t want to teach. “As a child, I was pained when classmates were having such a hard time,” she said. “I became an informal tutor to prove that given the right way of learning and appropriate support, everybody can learn.”

Diana gained a national reputation for educational reform with several highprofile superintendent jobs in Boston, Providence, and San Antonio, to name a few. Her approach: to encourage bold system-wide reform. In one school district, 42 low-performing schools moved out of that ranking during her tenure. In another instance, only 3 students passed the annual algebra standards test district wide before her arrival. Under her leadership, 34% of the students passed the test, nearing the state average of 37%. These are only a few of the achievements she inspired.

“Our students didn’t change; they came from the same families and same circumstances,” Diana said. “What changed was our belief that they could do it, and the way we went about helping them do it.”

Her leadership has not been without criticism, and she’s the first to point out that being passionate demands boldness and perseverance. “It was Frederick Douglass who said, ‘There is no progress without struggle,’ Progress happens when the mission is larger than oneself.”

Now, she is with Christel House International helping children around the world break the cycle of poverty and become self sufficient, contributing members of society. Her work takes her to India, Venezuela, and South Africa.

A history of low achievement does not deter Diana. “I don’t feel discouraged by huge numbers. I can live with one student a day that can do better; then, I’m pumped for the next day to have 2 kids doing better.” Each child gives her hope.

“I borrow from Vaclav Havel, former President of the Czech Republic, when he describes hope as ‘not the same as joy that things are going well, or a willingness to invest in what seems headed for early success,’” she said. “Hope is ‘an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed.’”