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Kareem Troncoso Guerrero steps up to fight climate crisis

The valedictorian of Match Charter Public High School's class of 2021 will head to Brown University in the fall

By **Kate Lusignan** Globe Correspondent, Updated July 3, 2021, 4:27 p.m.



Kareem Troncoso Guerrero was Match Charter Public High School's class of 2021 valedictorian.

DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

As Boston winters seem to become milder and summers more punctuated with heat waves, 18-year-old Kareem Troncoso Guerrero has become increasingly more concerned about climate issues.

And she is searching for solutions.

“Climate change is something that I have to do something about because it’s just so important to me,” she said in a recent Zoom interview.

Kareem, who was valedictorian for Match Charter Public High School’s class of 2021, said trips to the Dominican Republic, where her parents grew up and extended family still lives, piqued her interest in sustainability. On annual trips back there, she said, she sees garbage piled up on beaches, and that has worsened in recent years.

“The government doesn’t care about the trash, because poor people live there — and then you go to your resort areas and it’s all very clean, very nice,” she said.

Years of watching the beaches become more littered and neglected in poorer communities motivated Kareem to turn her observation into action.

“You see, like, a lot of issues, and you’re like, ‘Somebody else will take care of it,’” she said, “but there comes a point where you have to step up and you feel like it’s your civic duty to care for the place where you are from.”

Kareem’s drive to find solutions toward a more sustainable future stems from a compassionate nature, said Bess Thaler, her high school biology teacher, something she saw daily.

Kareem sat next to a student during her sophomore year biology class who sometimes struggled with the course material, Thaler recalled.

“I would circle back to them and I’d be like, ‘Oh, they’re good. Kareem’s got this,’” Thaler said.

But there was something else.

“Something that surprised me was that she later told me that she learned a lot from that student,” added Thaler.

Kareem said her family, specifically her mother, Digna Guerrero, an immigrant from the Dominican Republic who has lived in Boston since 2002, always stressed the importance of civic responsibility — and helping others.

“My mom always said, if you see something where it’s not supposed to be, you always have to have a sense of responsibility and a sense of discipline, so that you can get stuff done. You need to step up where you need to,” Kareem said.

Digna said her daughter has always been humble and helpful, even from a young age.

“Her great humility makes her special, she is super friendly and respectful,” Digna said in a text message. “Her sense of speaking and helping you is surprising; she manages to make you feel good.”

Kareem, an East Boston native who lives there with her parents and two sisters, values family.

Some of her favorite memories were made while spending the summers in the Dominican Republic, she said, especially time spent baking cheesecakes and cinnamon rolls with her grandmother.

Connecting with people all over the world has seemed to come naturally to Kareem throughout her life, something for which, she said, she has been “grateful.”

During her junior fall, Kareem said, she set out for the Alzar School, a semester school that takes students from Idaho to Chile to gain leadership skills and explore various academic passions.

Ashley LaCavalla, director of the college and career office at Match Charter Public Schools, said it is not unusual for students to spend a semester away from Match during their junior year in various programs within “driving distance” from Boston — but Kareem’s trek to Idaho was uncommon.

“The mental and physical toughness that she gets from these experiences is what she brings back with her in the classroom and also her interactions with adults and her peers,” said LaCavalla.

Despite all of Kareem’s academic accomplishments, her kindness and consideration were emphasized by those who know her well, including LaCavalla.

“She’s pretty secure and confident in her beliefs, but also is always thinking about other people,” said LaCavalla.

After landing in Idaho, Kareem was immediately thrown into the deep end during one of the program’s first excursions: white water kayaking. But she met the challenge. She struggled with navigating the river at first, she said, but then she grew to love kayaking.

“I always volunteered to go on the kayaks. It was so fun and it was an adrenaline rush,” she said smiling.

Kareem said that semester changed the way she viewed the world — and her understanding of sustainability.

At the end of it, Kareem and a classmate on the trip launched “Coast 2 Coast,” a program that focused on introducing nature and environmentalism to middle school students in Massachusetts and in California, where her cofounder lives.

“More kids should be able to experience and have that sort of connection — I just want people to be able to experience the earth,” said Kareem.

Learning about cultures different from her own was within her comfort zone before Kareem attended the Alzar School.

Each summer, starting with the one after her freshman year, Kareem participated in a program at Phillips Andover Academy called MS-squared, or Math and Science for Minority Students, a three-year program that focuses on STEM research.

Although Kareem thrived with the academic challenges, she said her favorite part of that program was connecting with other students from across the United States and learning about their cultures and communities.

“I remember Native American students put on a play about how they don’t get federal grants,” she said. “I was very grateful to learn firsthand from them about what it’s like to be part of their communities.”

Those close to Kareem say that she does not shy away from new challenges — actually, quite the opposite; she embraces them with curiosity and fervor.

Kareem will continue searching for sustainable answers next year at Brown University, where she plans to study agricultural or environmental engineering.

“I’m 70 percent sure that I want to be an environmental engineer, but ... I like that Brown gives me options to explore,” said Kareem.