Black Hawk College alumna Margarita Raya Mojica pursued her career as a bilingual teacher because she recognized a need.

“I became a teacher to be the kind of teacher I needed when I was growing up,” she said.

She needed a teacher who could talk to Spanish-speaking parents and who inspired and encouraged students facing educational barriers.

The Moline native has taught bilingual students at Glenview Middle School in East Moline since 1996.

Mojica founded the nonprofit One By One, which help students become college-bound, with colleague and friend Charlene Upchurch-Taylor in 2013.

Black Hawk College alumna and member of the Alumni Hall of Fame Margarita Mojica recently received the Golden Apple Award for Excellence in Teaching. Photo provided by Golden Apple.

One By One helps Glenview students reach for higher educational goals, develop leadership skills, and become involved in their community.

Now in its seventh year, the nonprofit celebrated its third group of students graduating from high school.

“They are first-generation strong!” Mojica said.

Attending Black Hawk College

Mojica said high school was rocky for her academically – she attended out of routine, without understanding why she was there.

“It wasn’t until I graduated from high school that I understood that my lack of education was going to keep me in poverty,” she said.

Mojica said her parents are immigrants from Mexico who came from extreme poverty, and education was a luxury that their families could not afford.

Black Hawk College was an affordable alternative to a four-year college for Mojica, and her dad encouraged her to enroll.

With time and effort, she became a much more successful student in college than at Moline High School and proved to herself she could earn high grades.

“It gave me hope that I had the possibility of breaking out of my cycle of poverty I had grown up in,” she said.

After earning her Associate in Arts at Black Hawk College in 1991, she transferred to Western Illinois University in Macomb where she earned a bachelor’s degree in bilingual/bicultural education. She also earned a master’s degree in education at WIU.

Honored for excellence

Black Hawk College inducted Mojica into the college’s Alumni Hall of Fame in 2018, which she said was an incredible honor.

Golden Apple, an Illinois nonprofit dedicated to fostering teacher and school leader excellence, recognized Mojica with an award for Excellence in Teaching in May.

Black Hawk College alumna and member of the Alumni Hall of

The Golden Apple Award for Excellence in Teaching honors outstanding teachers for their roles in having lasting, positive effects on students’ lives and building stronger communities.

A committee selected this year’s 10 award recipients from more than 730 nominations of 4th-8th grade teachers. Due to COVID-19, Golden Apple got creative to present the awards this year.

Fame Margarita Mojica is the co-founder of One By One, a nonprofit dedicated to helping Glenview Middle School students become college-bound. Photo provided by Margarita Mojica.

Golden Apple surprised Mojica during a reverse parade in front of her school, where parents and students drove by to wave to Glenview teachers.

The surprise worked. Mojica said when she saw two vehicles with the Golden Apple logo drive by and caught a glimpse of her name, it all clicked, and she almost dropped to her knees.

“It sounds like a cliché, but finding out in January that I was a finalist and then learning more about the other finalists made it an honor just to be nominated,” she said.

Motivating students

Mojica has advice for other teachers – work hard at building trust with your students and know it will take time.

“Once students know that you have their back 100 percent, they will give you everything,” she said.

When you hit that point, Mojica said you will not dread Mondays or count down the days to summer breaks.

Her favorite part about teaching is celebrating victories and milestones with her students.

Students seek Mojica out to share great news, and Mojica calls home to translate students’ academic and personal accomplishments, which lifts them up.

“It lifts me up as well.”

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