Longtime Cabrillo College board member retires

Rebecca Garcia served 20 years

By TODD GUILD

Rebecca Garcia, who sat on Cabrillo College’s governing board for two decades, and whose career as an educator was launched when she enrolled in the community college when she was 30, resigned earlier this month.

“After 20 years I recognized that it was time to step aside and let someone else step in,” she said Tuesday.

Born and raised in Watsonville, Garcia attended Pajaro Elementary School and graduated from Watsonville High School.

She said her lifelong desire to be a teacher began when she was 6 years old.

That inspiration, she said, came when she arrived in first grade with only rudimentary reading skills. There she found an educator who was able to bring her up to speed with her fellow students.

“My teacher taught me to read and write in a way that was not threatening, with patience, caring and love,” she said. “I wanted to be like her.”

Garcia’s plans were sidetracked in high school, however, when a counselor said her family was too poor for her to go to college, she said. Instead, the counselor enrolled her in office skills classes at Cabrillo to prepare her for a career as a secretary.

Rebecca Garcia recently retired from the Cabrillo College governing board after 20 years of service.

But that choice didn’t excite her, so she dropped out to become a hairdresser, a career she stayed with for 12 years.

“But I never forgot my goal of being a teacher,” she said.

When Garcia was 30, she went back to Cabrillo, where she earned a degree in bilingual studies. She transferred to UC Santa Cruz, then to San Jose State University, where she earned a master’s degree in education.

She started teaching language arts and social studies at what was then called Rolling Hills Junior High, and then at Watsonville High School.

Eventually she started work as a principal at Rolling Hills Middle School.

When a member of Cabrillo’s governing board stepped down in 1992, Garcia knew she wanted to run.

“I never would have had access to higher education if it wasn’t for Cabrillo College,” she said. “It was my way of giving back.”

During her time on the governing board, Garcia said she has seen growth in the numbers of Latino students who earn certificates or associate degrees, but pointed to a four-year study that shows they still lack in transferring to four-year universities.

“There has been improvement,” she said. “I was able to add to the discussion a perspective about the need to help our Latino students.”

Garcia said she planned to serve only two terms, but then her involvement with the Community College League of California and then at the national level with the American Association of Community Colleges required her to keep her seat.

Although she will be retired, that doesn’t mean Garcia won’t be busy. She plans to volunteer with a Cabrillo program that provides assistance to first-generation students.

Additionally, she has spoken with several people who are interested in filling her seat on the Cabrillo College Governing Board Area 5, which she said is 82 percent Latino. For that reason, Garcia said she’d like to see a Latino fill the position.

“I’m excited about the quality of the people who will be interviewing for the position,” she said.

Garcia said she didn’t always see eye-to-eye with her fellow governing board members, but still had high praise for them.

“I’ve met a lot of trustees and CEOs, and Cabrillo has one of the best boards in the state,” she said. “They are very focused on student success and completion.”