

Alexis Guerra (left) and Jazmine Smith from the Ann Richards School work in class.



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School Ties

As the Ann Richards School sends off its first graduates, the teachers and students reflect on six years of learning.

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113 Fun Things to Do

We've compiled our annual massive list of things to do this summer, including perennial favorites like Paramount Theatre's classic film series, but don't be afraid to break out and try something new, such as indoor skydiving.

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Ripe For the Pickin'

Tomatoes are the perfect summer ingredient to toss in a salad, grill on a kebab or to top a burger—and local tomatoes are the way to go. We chart the life of the juicy fruit from seedling to in a dish at Austin's best restaurants.





School Ties *As the Ann Richards School for Young Women Leaders graduates its first senior class, take a look back at the struggles, growth and triumphs of the Exemplary-rated school and meet three of its stellar students.* BY ANNE LANG / PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVEN VISNEAU



In a sunny gymnasium on the Southwest Austin campus of the Ann Richards School for Young Women Leaders, about 680 young women sit snugly packed on fold-out bleachers along one wall. An overflow of students spills out onto the floor, and the level of girlish chatter is deafening. Every piece of clothing on the school's uniform spectrum is represented, from blue plaid skirts to white collared shirts to tidy khaki pants.

It's Monday, which always kicks off the week with an all-school assembly (grades 6-12) at 9 a.m. This particular mid-February assembly was preceded by a "Donuts for Dads" breakfast, so a few dozen adult male figures are milling around the gym's periphery, watching the happy chaos with bemused expressions.

The din ceases as students are called upon to recite the Pledge of Allegiance, followed by the ARS Mission Statement (also said in unison, with zeal). The presence of the school's beloved namesake is palpable not only in spirit, but also by two billboard-sized photos of Richards that hang on the gym's opposite wall. The late Texas gover-

nor's trademark megawatt smile seems to shine an extra ray of light on the cavernous room.

Senior Nereyda Santiago-Arzate is today's featured speaker. By year's end, each of the 52 seniors at ARS will have taken a turn at the assembly microphone—all part of the school's vigorous efforts to ensure that every graduate will enter the world equipped with a broad scope of leadership capabilities. Santiago-Arzate is poised and articulate as she compares gaining an education at ARS with the challenge of training for a marathon, in which a runner adds more miles as her endurance level improves.

"We all know that this school isn't perfect,"



From left: Chancellor and President of Texas Woman's University Ann Stuart talks to a classroom of ARS seniors; Senior Nereyda Santiago-Arzate speaks to her classmates.

Santiago-Arzate concludes, "but we can make it perfect by changing things we don't like, adding things we enjoy, working hard and knowing it will all be worth it." The student body gives the grinning senior an enthusiastic round of applause as she rejoins her friends.

Building on a Vision

While perfection might be an elusive goal for ARS students and staff, there's no question that they've achieved a remarkably high measure of excellence in the six years since the school opened, welcoming sixth and seventh graders in the fall of 2007. One grade was added each year, so ARS will graduate its inaugural class of seniors (who entered as seventh graders) on June 8, as part of the Austin Independent School District. It will be a banner day for a school that's repeatedly been awarded the top rating of Exemplary by the Texas Education Agency.

Inspired by Lee Posey, founder of the Dallas-based Foundation for the Education of Young Women (with which AISD operates ARS in a public-private partnership), Richards envisioned a tuition-free AISD school that would offer an exceptional college-prep curriculum for girls of mixed backgrounds. Richards—who died in 2006 at the age of 73, just one year before the opening

of ARS—based the school's concept on two proven models: the Young Women's Leadership School in New York City and the Irma Lerma Rangel Leadership School in Dallas.

"My mother's vision was to create a school in which girls who had promise but lacked opportunity could

excel," says Ellen Richards, one of the former governor's four children, who was chair of the school's initial advisory board and is chair emeritus of the ARS Foundation. "She wanted a place where girls could set a course for their future, dream big and realize those dreams. The thing that was most important to my mom was to provide opportunity for girls who lacked the socioeconomic support to pursue their educational goals."

Indeed, while 61 percent of ARS students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, the school's educational offerings are distributed equally to all. According to its mission statement, ARS "dedicates itself to prepare young women to attend and graduate from college; commit to a healthy and well-balanced lifestyle; lead with courage and compassion; and solve problems creatively and ethically in support of our global community."

It was with those ambitious goals in mind that ARS was born. Housed in the former Porter Middle School, a sprawling, aged AISD facility built in 1957, the school operated solely as a middle school until the fall of 2009, when the class of "Original Stars" (as the current seniors proudly call themselves) reached ninth grade. By then, the modifications and additions required for operating a high school, such as advanced science labs, were in place, as were numerous means to prepare all grades for college and the working world.

For example, the students visit university campuses beginning in sixth grade, eventually branching out beyond Texas. Juniors engage in week-long internships at local companies, hospitals or organizations, while seniors participate in group capstone projects based on "pathways," or specific areas of academic concentration that they chose as freshmen. Group projects at all grade levels reinforce the school's emphasis on problem-solving and building leadership skills.

There's a full-time college advisor whose sole mission is to provide information and financial-aid guidance for college applicants. Every student is required to take part in community service projects during the year. Yet there are plenty of avenues for creative expression, including athletics, theater, art, dance, band, orchestra, choir and a host of other options from robotics to a roller derby team.



ANDREA LEE
The Senior Class President

Andrea Lee, 17, remembers being nervous before starting ARS as a seventh grader in the fall of 2007. "I was a little scared that I wouldn't make any friends," she says, "but I ended up meeting my best friend on the first day of Transition Camp."

During grade school, Lee had been ribbed about her diminutive size. So coming into ARS, she was insecure about her height. "But I've never been teased at this school," she says. "You can really be yourself around a bunch of girls, and we all embrace people from different backgrounds, races and cultures."

This year, she's president of the senior class, a member of the National Honor Society and involved in theater. She also works part-time at an ice cream shop, is helping classmates to design a water system for an actual colonia and volunteers for the nonprofit Kibera Penda, which raises funds for the impoverished schoolchildren of a region in Nairobi, Kenya, where Lee traveled last summer.

Having visited the campuses of a whopping 38 colleges since seventh grade, Lee has been accepted to her first-choice school, Trinity University in San Antonio, as well as Colgate University in upstate New York and Austin's own St. Edward's University. She is still undecided about where she will go, but she plans to major in psychology and perhaps become a psychiatrist someday. While Lee looks forward to a more typical social scene in college, she relishes the time she had at her all-female school. "The fact that we're the first class has really molded us into being leaders," she says. "Being an Original Star is really special to me."



MARIA CRUZ
The Math Whiz

Maria Cruz was 6 when she moved to the U.S. from Mexico with her parents and five siblings. She quickly adapted to the new language, and by sixth grade, she had advanced to the Kealing Middle School Magnet Program, which Jeanne Goka directed at the time.

"Ms. Goka was transferring to ARS as the first principal," explains Cruz, now 18. "She and my science teacher encouraged me to apply to ARS. My parents were supportive, but it was my initiative that got me to Kealing, and then here."

National Honor Society member Cruz is also part of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology InventTeam at ARS, funded by a \$10,000 grant from MIT to create a unique invention. The group is making a nonelectric, compressed-air-powered refrigerator. The formulas are right up the alley of math whiz Cruz, who wants to major in mechanical or electrical engineering on her journey to becoming an inventor in the realm of new technology.

As for college, "I have some choices," says Cruz, who like many ARS students logs three to five hours of homework every night. "I'd love to stay close to home and go to UT, but my dream school that I've applied to is Yale. I've also applied to Rice and some others."

Looking back on her time at ARS, Cruz says a lack of self-advocacy was her biggest challenge. But eventually she found confidence in herself through the support of her teachers and classmates. "They've taught me to be who I am, to know that I'm smart and to just follow my gut feelings," she says.

Taking Risks

However, the road to success hasn't always been smooth. There have been more than a few bumps along the way, according to Jeanne Goka, who's served as ARS principal from the start.

"Before we began, we had no proven record," Goka says. "We were out there as pioneers, and we had to convince a lot of people that this was worth it. Not just our students, who were very brave; and not just their parents, who took a chance with us; but an entire community of naysayers who were waiting for us to fail. But in our first year, we recorded the highest test scores in the district, and we were rated Exemplary."

Every year, Goka visits all 80 AISD grade schools to talk about ARS. The girls whose paths lead them to ARS "come in here ebullient," she says. "They just love being here. I get them at a good time, because when I visit them they're still fifth graders, and fifth grade girls typically can't stand boys. So when they enter sixth grade here, they're fresh, free and uninhibited. They don't have to worry about some boy making [derogatory] comments."

AISD 2010 Middle School Teacher of the Year Jill DiCuffa, who's been at ARS from the start and teaches American history and leadership classes, recalls that the early days were tough on students—not just in adjusting to a rigorous curricu-

lum that emphasizes pre-AP and AP courses in the STEM fields (science, technology, engineering and math), but having to endure social pressures as well. "It looked ideal from the outside, but from day one that first year, the girls were teased by kids outside the school," DiCuffa says.

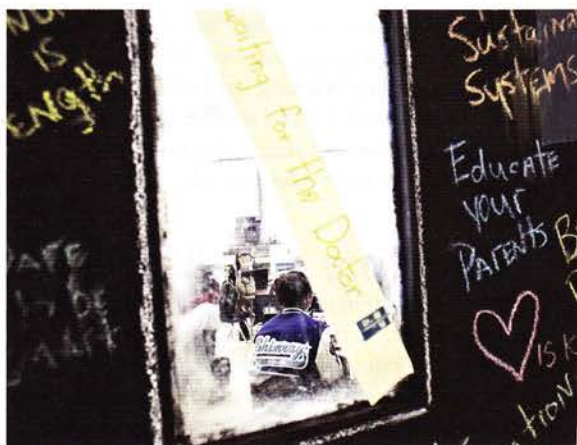
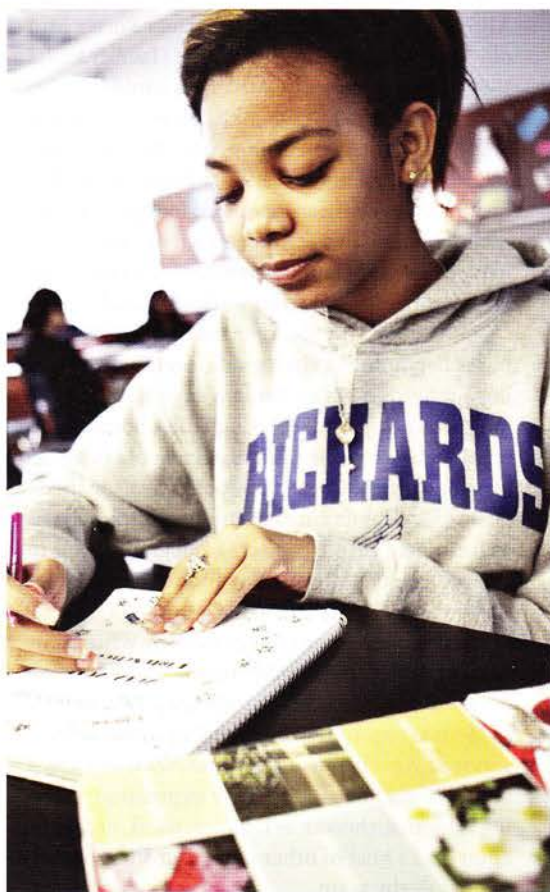
Back then, the girls shared buses with another school, DiCuffa says. "They had to get onboard in their uniforms, and they were teased incessantly," she says. "I could tell you some phrases they heard that would curl your hair. So every day, the girls questioned themselves: 'Is this really worth it?'"

"That first year, all of us teachers spent most of our time and energy making it worth it for them to stick it out," she adds. "From classes to extra-curricular activities, we said, 'We have to make it better, even better than they ever expected.'"

And yet, DiCuffa says, the school wasn't a fit for everyone. "Some just choose to leave; some move away with their families.

We've had growing pains every single year," she says. "And we still ask ourselves every day: 'Are we making it worth it for them to be here?' We want to make it worth the students' risk to stay."

Clockwise from left: Sophomore Kalya Barlow peers at her notebook; motivational phrases line the door of a classroom; Freshmen Alexandra Migl and Chancinique Chalhiam work with skeleton models.





Looking Ahead

Although ARS is a public school, gaining admission is a multifaceted process. Not every applicant is guaranteed a spot, but girls who don't make the cut are encouraged to keep trying annually. An aspiring student is required to write a letter stating her reasons for wanting to attend ARS. She also must submit her most recent report card, attendance record, state-mandated test score and teacher recommendations. Her application is then placed in a "fair and anonymous lottery" as a final determination of selection.

And, as DiCuffa noted, those who are admitted don't always stay. Some girls end up feeling overwhelmed by the high academic expectations. Others succumb to the lure of a coed school and all of its social outlets. The attrition rate for the junior and senior classes at ARS continues to hover around 50 percent. But those who remain say it's all worth it, including three seniors who've been there from the get-go (see their profiles starting on page 129).

Analyzing the school from a much newer perspective is Andy Langford, who teaches high school pre-AP biology, AP biology and biomedical science. A Louisiana native, Langford is completing his first year at ARS, having transferred to Texas after teaching in New York City for eight years.

"The level of preparation that the girls have already had when I get them was something I hadn't experienced before. The foundation that's laid here in middle school and ninth grade is amazing, so I really had to hit the ground running," he says. "This school puts high expectations on its teachers to be involved and creative."

As for the girls-only format, Langford thinks it is refreshing. He says students feel that they've

come here with a purpose: to get an education and prepare themselves for college, without the distraction of boys. "I love to see so many girls interested in science, who are willing to speak up and ask questions," he says. "In coed schools, even the girls who have a tremendous aptitude for science often aren't willing to show it."

Langford will be among the many proud ARS faculty and staff present on graduation day to send off the school's groundbreaking class of seniors. Someone else who wouldn't miss the occasion for anything is Ellen Richards (whose siblings Cecile, Clark and Dan are also longtime, staunch supporters of the school).

"I've seen all those girls grow up since they were in seventh grade, and what they've accomplished has really been remarkable," Richards says. "I have such tremendous respect for the leadership at the school and for the girls for going through this journey with us. It wasn't easy for those early students to go to this brand-new school, but they've hung in there with us. They're true pioneers."

She expects to be emotional on June 8, adding: "Pretty much any time I'm at the school, I'm on the verge of happy tears."

Those feelings are due in no small part to the memory of her mother, who helped start it all. What does her daughter think the late great Texas leader would say if she could see how far her namesake school has progressed in six years? Richards has a ready answer: "I think she would say: 'Wow, we did it!'" ■

Jill DiCuffa, who was named the AISD Middle School Teacher of the Year in 2010, shares a laugh with her students.



JAILYN BANKSTON
The Future FBI Agent

Jaielyn Bankston, 17, is particularly excited about walking across the stage on June 8. Since her last name comes first alphabetically among her 51 classmates, she'll be the first one to receive her diploma, making her the very first graduate of ARS. It's a fitting circumstance, since Bankston also was the first ARS senior to be accepted to any college.

"Way back in ninth grade, I decided I wanted to go to Sam Houston State University and major in criminal justice," Bankston says. "That was the school of my dreams. I applied last August, got my acceptance letter two weeks later and haven't applied to any other schools. I told the admissions officer, 'I'll see you in August 2013!'"

Bankston, who is shooting for a high-ranking FBI job someday, works part-time at Chick-fil-A and volunteers at the Austin Humane Society. She's also involved in Youth in Government through the YMCA and competes on the ARS track team. Last year, she was editor-in-chief of the school yearbook, and in ninth grade, she started a group called Leading Ladies, which was geared toward minorities and focused on empowerment and academic support.

Bankston says the legacy of the school's namesake is well known and revered by all ARS students. "I think every one of the girls in this school has some kind of connection to Ann Richards," she says. "Each of us either has a firecracker personality, or likes doing community service, or wants to be in politics. So we all have a piece of Ann in us."