

In Her Words: October



Rocio Castaneda



“I’m an immigrant. I’m a minority. I’m a woman.”

Every woman has a story. But some stories shake rooms, open doors, and redefine what’s possible. In Her Words is SAR’s series spotlighting trailblazing women who lead with courage, shape community with intention, and inspire the next generation through purpose, resilience, and grace.

Rocio was born and raised in El Salvador, where opportunities were scarce and the path ahead was never guaranteed. After high school, she faced a choice: follow the limited options around her or chase something bigger, even if it felt impossible. She enrolled at the Central American University, but secretly, she dared to dream even farther. Without telling her parents, she applied to the Sorbonne University in Paris, one of the world's most competitive schools. When the French embassy notified her that she had been accepted in the first round, it was proof that boldness could rewrite destiny.

When Rocio struggled to find work after her studies, her parents encouraged her to move to the United States. He had worked tirelessly to give his children opportunities he never had. In Texas, she started as a bank teller. Each promotion became a stepping stone. Finance was never part of her original plan, but it became a way to survive, grow, and carve out her place in a new country.

In 2014, Rocio chose to chase a dream that once felt out of reach and enrolled in an aviation school in Florida. Out of 300 students, only two were women. At the time, women made up less than 6% of pilots in the United States and just 3% worldwide. She stepped into a world with few examples of someone like her, a successful immigrant woman in the cockpit. Still, she refused to let that stop her. She earned her FAA pilot license, proving to herself that she could break through barriers even when the odds felt stacked against her. When the school unexpectedly closed in 2016, it could have ended her dream. Instead, Rocio chose to see it as a moment to refocus and a chance to keep pushing forward.

Rather than quitting, Rocio returned to El Salvador and focused on creating opportunities in a field where women are vastly underrepresented. She became a certified flight instructor, sharing her knowledge and inspiring young pilots. She spoke at universities and conferences, appeared in national media, and used every platform she could to highlight the importance of STEM education and encourage women to pursue careers in aviation. Through mentorship, advocacy, and scholarships, she continues to open doors for women who have long been told they do not belong in these spaces.

Rocio values most being a mentor and a voice for those often overlooked. She lives by a quote that has guided her since her teens: “Even the one who limps is still walking.” It reminds her that no matter the obstacle, whether gender, circumstance, or background, progress begins with the courage to take the first step. Her life is a testament to perseverance, vision, and the belief that one person can spark change for many.

Rocio encourages the next generation to believe in themselves, even when the path feels impossible. “Just because things are difficult or seem out of reach does not mean that they are impossible to achieve,” she says. She hopes her story inspires others to listen, uplift, and support one another. “You can be an agent for change. You can start within your family, and help young girls know they can do whatever they want and work hard for it.”

Through her life and work, Rocio shows that breaking barriers, lifting communities, and shaping legacies is possible when determination meets opportunity. Rocio’s story is a call to action for mentors to rise, for systems to evolve, and for every young girl listening to know: you belong in every room, every cockpit, every boardroom, every future you choose.

“That is one of my goals in life, to reach out to as many people as I can and let them know that they are capable of whatever their heart desires”.

And that is what she continues to do. This is Rocio. This is SAR.

By Hector Zamora



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