

Overcoming All Odds

Program changes some HHS students into most promising.

By Scott J. Krischke

June 15, 2006

When Herndon's Quantum Opportunities Program, a four-year after school tutoring program for Herndon High School students with below average grades, was launched, no one, not even the program's founding director, thought that they would be able to help their students turn their academic lives around as much as they have over the course of the program.

"In the beginning, it seemed so impossible," said Sandra Sweazie, the original program coordinator who left to take care of her own children after the program's second year. "The [Herndon High School] counselors gave us a bunch of names, and it was essentially the kids that the teachers and administrators had almost given up on."

Now, 17 of the original 20 students in the program — some moved away from Herndon or dropped out of the program — will be either graduating from Herndon High School, or receiving their diploma through Job Corps or as a General Education Diploma, according to the program's current coordinator, Amy McFarland.

Since the program was only meant to be for four years, it will cease operations this Friday, when Herndon High School's seniors graduate.

To celebrate the success of the students and the end of the program, McFarland, tutors, community volunteers and students and their families gathered at the center, a unit in the Park Ridge Garden Apartments of Herndon, for a small, catered graduation party last Thursday.

SEATED QUIETLY during the celebration with his four-year-old brother José Luis on his lap was 19-year-old Fabian Pérez, who, just like almost 500 other Herndon High School seniors, will walk across the stage and receive his high school diploma at George Mason University's Patriot Center this Friday.

For Pérez, who was raised in the United States but was born in the state of Morelos, Mexico, just south of Mexico City, this conclusion wasn't always so clear — or positive.

"High school was a lot different from middle school, and freshman year is the year that you don't



Photo by Scott J. Krischke
Graduating Herndon High School student Fabian Pérez, 19, sits on the stoop outside of the Quantum Opportunities Center, where he received academic tutoring throughout the program's four-year tenure.

usually do a whole lot," said Pérez as he sat on the concrete stoop outside of the center. "According to [my grades] freshman year, no, I wasn't graduating."

"I was more concerned with my friends ... and going out."

"It was especially hard for [Pérez] because his parents work very hard jobs for long hours and he was always translating [English to Spanish] for them when they needed it," Sweazie said. "That was an added responsibility for him."

But it wasn't failing a class or receiving "mostly D's" on his first report cards that gave Pérez the motivation that was needed to change the direction of his life.

DURING THE MIDDLE of his sophomore year, his friend and sometime guest at the center, José Sandoval, was shot and killed by a gang member in Herndon.

Pérez took it as a wake up call.

"I had tragedies happen in my life before but nothing like this, nothing so close," Pérez said as he rubbed his shortly-trimmed hair and looked towards the sky. "I realized that life is too short to just let it pass by and sit around doing nothing your whole life."

"I saw some of my friends who were older and I saw where they were at in their lives and that's not where I wanted to be at that time of my life," he added. "You can't just sit around and do nothing with yourself, everyone has goals and ambitions and to be able to accomplish that you've got to go out and make it happen."

Sweazie recognized that as the death of his friend affected Pérez, his responsibilities to his family and to his professional life became more clear.

"I think it made him more determined to finish school, and not to just to finish, but to do well," Sweazie said. "He started to come [to the program after school] a lot more."

MAKING THE TRANSITION from a student who neglected homework and blew off studying was the farthest thing from easy, according to Pérez.

"I went from basically not trying at all to try a lot, and it was hard ... to go from doing absolutely nothing," Pérez said, with a slight laugh and an accomplished shake of the head. "Along the way I would start to go down that path towards not caring every now and then, but every time I did that I would see the people behind me, the people who care."

The support of his friends and family were key towards keeping him focused on achieving his goals, Pérez said.

In the end, the struggle made the victory that much sweeter.

"It's more rewarding when things are really hard in the beginning," Pérez said. "Anything that's

worth getting, you've got to work for, and sometimes it's better to struggle."

"I had to work twice as hard during that time just to be able to catch up," he added, "but you appreciate it more in the end."

The four-year high school marathon that Pérez will complete on Friday will not just leave him with a diploma, but also with a complete transformation from an apathetic freshman to a career-driven adult, his mother, Teresa Pérez pointed out. Fabian will be her first child to graduate from high school.

"Going through high school, you have to always be maturing and growing," Teresa Pérez . "He's so much older, so much more of an adult now."

"We speak more than we did before," Teresa Pérez added, "but our communication with each other has always been the thing that has helped us the most."

Pérez "was very shy and self conscious when he first came to us," Sweazie said. "But as he kept coming and growing older, he became a leader among the kids here ... he could take charge of a situation, but still get along with everybody."

"He looks so grown up now," Sweazie said of Fabian Pérez as she brushed a tear from her eye, "when I first met [Pérez and the other students] they were babies ... I can't believe they've come this far."

PERÉZ'S NEXT STEPS will be attending Northern Virginia Community College in the fall and learning the contracting business with his father, he said.

"The ultimate goal would be success, and that's what everybody wants," Pérez said. "But when you get a little older you realize that success is not just monetary value, but things like family and friends."

"I want him to keep doing whatever he wants, and he has that option now," said Teresa Pérez. "I'd like him to keep studying and make a life for himself."

"I guess I could have probably ended up down a much worse path, especially around ... gang influences," Pérez said. "What I've learned from my family was really able to help me move forward and get to where I am."

To Sweazie, Pérez and the rest of the students from the program who will receive diplomas this week are a testament to hard work and a positive attitude.

"I think this just shows that you don't have to be privileged, you don't have to have a lot of money to be successful," Sweazie said. "That's what this country's all about."

"As long as you work hard in your life, you can have anything."