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Esperanza 22 year of Fiesta bigger and better

By Arooj Ashraf, La Prensa Correspondent

Esperanza Inc. celebrated the 22nd Fiesta of Hope and awarded 93 scholarships of \$1,000 each to deserving students, with more than 750 supporters, parents and friends present at the Cleveland Renaissance Hotel on June 22, 2012.

Mayor *Frank G. Jackson* said he appreciates the commitment Esperanza shows to education and supporting excellence of its students and noted the administrations Higher Education Compact is addressing the gaps to make access to colleges easier, affordable, and possible. He said the problems have been identified, and it is now time to work together to address them collectively.

"With only 3 in 10 Hispanic students graduating from high school here in Cleveland, it is too easy to focus on the monumental problems facing our youth. However, *Fiesta of Hope* is about highlighting those students that are defying the odds and pursuing their education," said *Victor Ruiz*, Executive Director.

"This year we will be giving out the most scholarships in the history of our organization. We could not be prouder of these young people and look forward to their success." Ruiz added, the national Hispanic graduation rates are higher, almost twice the rate in the city—"This is a Cleveland problem that requires a Cleveland solution."

Esperanza staff and volunteers work with the scholarship recipients throughout their college experience to ensure their success. "At Esperanza, we are part of the solution," said Ruiz, "We need more mentors and advocates and volunteers."

Jessica González said the students each have amazing stories, struggles and successes that moved the selection committee to tears, and laughter, but most of all made them proud to be helping these students achieve their dreams and aspirations.



Maria Lopez and Sandra Manzanares



Sr. Alicia Alvarado and Victor Ruiz



Andrea Sánchez and Miguel Sánchez

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Students like 35-year-old *Miguel Sánchez*, who grew up in the projects and has been incarcerated multiple times, “The last time I was really there for necessity,” he said. In the last two years he has decided to turn his life around and earned his GED. He is now enrolled at *Cuyahoga Community College* achieving a 4.0 semester grade point average. “It will sound cliché, but God motivated me to turn my life around,” he said. Sánchez said his pride made him want to accomplish everything on his own; he struggled in math class but then discovered something important in life—“I realized how much easier it was if I just asked for help, and got tutored.”



Mayor Jackson & Victor Ruiz

He said it is an important lesson for him; it is ok to ask for help. He wants to earn his sociology degree from *Cleveland State University*, and help young men like himself. “They can never tell me: ‘What do you know?’ because I’ll tell them grab a seat and get some lunch because we’ll be here a while,” he said. College isn’t just providing him with text book knowledge; he is also learning important lessons in life—“If I am too proud to ask for help, how can I help others?”

His mother, *Andrea Sánchez*, stood beside him beaming with pride. “He has a good heart, I am proud of him and that he wants to help others.”

María López is a senior at *Norte Dame College* studying biology to prepare for medical school. She is a third-time recipient of Esperanza’s scholarship and says she is definitely grateful for all the assistance, “Every little bit counts.”

A first-time college student in the family, López is motivating her older brother to complete his GED. “He has a wife and daughter so he’s doing it for them and to have a better future, and I am there encouraging him to look at possibilities of college.” She encourages him to utilize Esperanza’s program.

López said she wants to be able to make a difference in other people’s lives. Her mother, *Sandra Manzanares*, arrived from Nicaragua 15 years ago and said she couldn’t be more proud of her daughter’s achievements. “I am grateful for Esperanza and the donors and yes we can achieve our dreams,” she said.

Keynote speaker, *Sandra Pianalto*, President and Chief Executive Officer of Federal Reserve Bank, shared her family’s inspirational immigrant story of coming from Italy to the U.S. “My parents saw this as an investment in our future.”

She recalls how her parents struggled to learn the language and when they spoke with an accent how people treated them, “What I learned from that is to treat people with respect,” Pianalto said; for every student graduating high school there are others who are not, and they are the ones who will be living in hardship.

“We can ignore the education problem but we cannot ignore the consequences,” she said. Pianalto said that learning is a never-ending process and being forced out of comfort zones is a great way to grow in leaps and bounds. “This scholarship is an investment to create a life worthy of your proud families and heritage and I hope it brings you much joy,” she said.

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Revised: 06/26/12 19:54:40 -0700.

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Culturas Publication, Inc. d.b.a. La Prensa Newspaper

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