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## Perris Honors High School Students of the Year

The Students of the Year from the Perris Union High School District are not content to improve their own lives and those of their community.

They want nothing less than to change the world.

Perris High School recipient Hai Vu, who is off to study at USC, wants to clone organs for transplant.

California Military Institute winner Eddy Salas, who is enrolled at UC Irvine, plans a career in biomedical engineering, the stuff of robotic limbs and other space-age inventions becoming more and more available to patients today.

Paloma Valley High School Student of the Year Esmeralda Garcia will be attending UCLA to develop ways of making artificial intelligence more human.

And Heritage High School recipient Karla Ortiz, who will attend UC Berkeley, will use her knowledge of law and politics to enhance economic justice for the impoverished.

The four were honored May 28 during the 15th Annual Student of the Year Scholarship and Recognition ceremony, an event that attracted Perris elected officials as well as business, civic and educational leaders.

Perris Mayor Daryl Busch, City Councilman Julio Rodriguez and City Clerk Nancy Salazar were among the Perris representatives attending.

Busch called the recipients "among our best and brightest" and said the City is proud of their achievements and accomplishments.

"The Student of the Year program celebrates the culmination of their monumental high-school careers," he said. "It's a marvelous program."

Rodriguez, who was named Perris High School Student of the Year in 2003, asked the students to never forget their hometown, no matter where future employment opportunities or career choices take them.

"I am proud and happy to continue to celebrate the academic achievement of our City and to continue to encourage our graduates to do big things," Rodriguez said.



Perris Union High School District Students of the Year proudly display their medallions: Hai Vu, Perris High School; Eddy Salas, California Military Institute; Esmeralda Garcia, Paloma Valley High School and Karla Ortiz, Heritage High School.

Here are brief biographies of the Students of the Year:

### Hai Vu, 17, Perris High School

Hai Vu arrived from Vietnam to Perris 12 years ago and could not speak one word of English. Arriving at Perris High School as a shy freshman, Vu blossomed and quickly showed her academic prowess. In addition to maintaining a near-perfect grade-point average (one B in four years of high school) Vu is a member of the Calculus Club, the Academic Decathlon Team, the Constitutional Quiz Team, Science Club as well as an online blogger, writing for "the prospect" and "the wannabe scientist" blogs. She volunteers at the Riverside County Regional Medical Center where her duties include working at the patient information desk and escorting visitors to see hospitalized friends and relatives. Vu says that illegal organ harvesting is common in Vietnam and her desire to end that practice drove her to research and study organ cloning, which also will shorten the waiting time for recipients. She will be studying at USC, hopes to attain a PhD and work in or operate her own research lab.

Of her distinction as Student of the Year, Vu said: "My mom cried. I joined her. It is such a great honor and one that I did not expect."



Perris City Councilman Julio Rodriguez, flanked by Mayor Daryl Busch and City Clerk Nancy Salazar, offers his congratulations to the Students of the Year.

### Eddy Salas, 18, California Military Institute

Richard Wallis, principal of CMI, says Salas is "one of the finest cadets I have ever seen" at the school. When a promotions board recently asked a group of CMI student which person they most admired, the most common answer was Salas. It was Salas who instructed the younger cadets to not fear the board or its questions but just to answer them as best they could.

"Eddy served as an inspiration to the younger cadets," Wallis said.

Salas will attend UC Irvine to study biomedical engineering, a field that includes developing robotic prosthetic arms and legs, microchip implant, regenerative tissue growth and the machinery that makes it all possible. Away from school, Salas frequently volunteers at St. James the Lesser Catholic Church in Perris. This year, he played wide receiver and cornerback on the football squad. He will enroll early in college to get ahead in math while continuing to work out in the gym. The next few years will be difficult but rewarding.

"If you pursue a career you love you will never work a day in your life," Salas said in remarks at the ceremony. "I look forward to making a difference in the world."



Perris Mayor Daryl Busch congratulates the Students of the Year.

### Esmeralda Garcia, 18, Paloma Valley High School

Garcia will attend UCLA to study pre-cognitive science, a field that combines computer science and psychology. Her goal: marry feeling with artificial intelligence.

"My passion is people," she said. "I want to mix humans with computers!"

While many college students struggle with the challenges of paying for an education, Garcia has no such concerns. She is 1 of 300 Dell Scholars in the county and 1 of 1,000 Gates Millennium Scholars, her tuition and other costs are paid in full. Garcia has completed a battery of Advance Placement courses at school while accruing more than 1,000 hours of community service, which includes feeding the homeless, tutoring middle-school children and serving as a peer role model. She's also involved in Relay for Life activities.

Garcia will be enrolling in school to complete math and chemistry classes. She thanked Palmoma AVID instructor Beatriz O'Connell for "giving me the passion to pursue my dream and for believing in me." AVID is a college-prep program for university-bound students.

Of her Student of the Year selection, Garcia said she is "really honored to see my hard work pay off. People have had faith in me. I hope I'll be able to inspire other students."



California Military Institute Principal Richard Wallis presents Eddy Salas with a Student of the Year Medallion.

### Karla Ortiz, 18, Heritage High School

While many of her peers rested and recreation on spring break this year, Ortiz traveled to the impoverished Dominican Republic city of Monte Christi, where she worked for a week as an elementary school teacher. Sponsored by the National Honor Society, the trip left Ortiz with a deep appreciation of the struggle faced in many developing countries—particularly lack of basic supplies like textbooks and pencils.

"It made me grateful that I am being educated in the United States," she said.

A highlight of the trip came when Ortiz taught the K-3 class to count to 10 in English and say simple words like "table" and "chair."

Ortiz is heading to UIC Berkeley to pursue a career in political science, which could expand to include and economics. She is well-suited for the challenge, said Paloma principal Julie Zierold, who called her "one of the brightest young women I have ever met—humble but motivated." Ortiz said she wants to uplift disadvantaged people through economic justice initiatives.

In addition to her studies, Ortiz plays alto saxophone for the Mighty Patriot Regiment Marching Band, which has performed at several City of Perris parades. About her selection as a Student of the Year, Ortiz said that "it's a huge honor for which I really have no words to describe. My parents are proud and I am proud of myself"

Thanks to sponsorships from business, chambers of commerce and communities like the City of Perris, each student received \$2,148 in scholarship funding in the form of gift cards, pens and laundry baskets—the latter to remind them that maybe for the first time, they will have to wash their own dirty clothes.

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