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Five High School Seniors Honored at Student of the Year Awards



Perris City Clerk Nancy Salazar and Mayor Michael Vargas with the 2018 Student of the Year Award recipients: Dayra Leal Sanchez, Heritage High School; Esteban Rodriguez, Lake Perris High School; Erick Amezcua, Paloma Valley High School; Sonia Singh, California Military Institute and Rosa Baiza, Perris High School.

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The five graduating high-school seniors honored by the City of Perris and numerous other public and private entities May 30 share several common traits.

They all emigrated to the U.S. as kids or are first-generation born in America.

They all speak multiple languages. They became recognized as peer leaders and role models for their work in the classroom, extra-curricular activities and community service. And they're all pursuing educational dreams in college in fields as diverse as astrophysics, computer-information systems, medical research, immigration and criminal law.

Perris Mayor Michael Vargas and City Clerk Nancy Salazar represented the City at the 20th Annual Student of the Year Scholarship and Recognition Awards.

"This ceremony represents honoring the best of the best," Vargas said. "They've earned well-deserved and momentous achievements. It's always a pleasure to be here to support our youth. You have to show these kids that we're watching them and we're here to support their achievements. That gives them a really good sense of pride."

Vargas' one wish for the Students of the Year: "I hope they come back to Perris and make our community a better place."

Salazar said the Students of the Year have more than earned the night of accolades that was heaped upon them.

In addition the City of Perris, The Perris Valley Chamber of Commerce, The Rotary Club of Perris, several Perris businesses and those of surrounding communities, educational groups and individuals donated enough funds to provide each recipient a scholarship of \$3,050. The winners also received plaques, medallions, certificates and proclamations from Perris, regional, state and national elected representatives.

"It's really important to learn what these students have accomplished and exciting to learn about their future plans," Salazar said.

Grant Bennett, Superintendent of the Perris Union High School District, served as Master of Ceremonies during the recognition. He too echoed sentiments voiced by Perris elected officials.

"These kids are doing great things," Bennett said. "They can compete with any graduates in the country. They will make a difference. They will do great things."

The 2018 Perris Union High School District Students of the Year are:

*Erick Amezcua, 17; Paloma Valley High School

Erick will attend UCLA to study astrophysics—the science that seeks to explain how the universe behaves. Erick was valedictorian of the class of 2018 and graduated with a 4.83-grade point average. His course schedule as a senior included six Advanced Placement courses—including two in English, one in language and the other in literature, which included reading Shakespeare. His favorite play from the Bard: Hamlet.

Erick played first trumpet in the school band, the 120-member Paloma Valley Wildcat Brigade. The band took part in a competition when he first joined as a freshman. The contingent finished dead last—34th place. Erick organized practice sessions to instill the notion of "how fun it can be to improve." It worked. In the last year, the Wildcat Brigade took top honors in three band competitions. Erick will continue his band work as a Bruin. He also served as vice-president of the Paloma Valley Key Club, a service group that helped organize the Menifee Spring Festival. He also gave musical lessons to middle-school students and served as a homework mentor.

"I find it truly heart-warming that all of the late nights, struggles and sacrifices (all the Students of the Year made) are being recognized and rewarded on a level I've never seen or experienced."

Erick's parents, Carlos and Sinttiah, emigrated to the U.S. from Spain. Erick is fluent in Spanish.

*Rosa Baiza, 18; Perris High School

Rosa will attend UC Berkeley to pursue a political science degree, with the ultimate goal of becoming either a criminal or immigration attorney. The daughter of immigrants from Mexico, she is grateful to be given the chance to pursue her education at one of the country's great universities. Her father picked fruits and vegetables to support the family while her mother worked long hours to make a home for Rosa and her two younger brothers.

Rosa admits that she had little interest in academics when she entered Perris High School.

"We didn't have a lot of money," she said. "I thought I would never be able to attend college."

Then Rosa got involved in the school's Junior ROTC group, eventually rising to the top spot as the Battalion Commander. The unit performs at sporting events and takes part in the annual City of Perris Veterans Day Parade. She also jump-started her academics—achieving a 4.7-grade point average.

Rosa also organized a food drive to help local pantries, collecting more than 800 cans of food. Her motivation to repay her parents' sacrifices continue to provide her drive and motivation.



Perris Mayor Michael Vargas congratulates Students of the Year during a ceremony honoring them on May 30.

"My struggles can't compare to theirs," she said. "You grow up with knowledge that you will have opportunities they did not have. They struggled to make a better life for you. To not try your best undermines their efforts." Rosa's favorite classes at Perris High School included history and English. She speaks Spanish fluently.

*Esteban Rodriguez, 18; Perris Lake High School

Esteban will attend a junior college to study computer information systems. Esteban experienced a complete academic turn-around this year at Lake Perris High School, the district's continuation high-school. He went from a D-minus grade point average to a 4.0 average and will be the first member of his family to finish high school in four years.

Both his parents came to Perris from Mexico and neither had the chance to further their education and have had to struggle to get by in the U.S. He didn't want to disappoint them by dropping out.

His advice to others contemplating leaving school without a diploma: "You can make it. You can do it if you don't stop trying. No matter what anyone tells you, don't ever stop trying."

Perris Lake High School science instructor Gary Miller said Esteban was an ideal student. When Esteban finished a Miller assignment, he did something the teacher has seldom seen before—he asked for additional work.

"If I could clone someone, it would be Esteban," Miller said. "He is reliable, respectful, a natural leader, a quiet leader with a strong work ethic."

As part of his community service, Esteban organized extra-curricular activities and after-school events at Quail Valley Elementary School. In his spare time, Esteban enjoys playing billiards and Nintendo with his friends. Esteban is fluent in Spanish.

*Dayra Leal Sanchez, 18; Heritage High School

Dayra won a full-ride scholarship to Emory University in Atlanta where she plans to study political science with an ultimate goal of practicing criminal law. As a child growing up in a one-room house in the Mexican State of Queretaro, Dayra and her family witnessed violence on a regular basis—murders, robberies, assaults—and watched the perpetrators escape justice. Seeing such injustice, Dayra said, nurtured a passion to bring about justice in her adopted home country.

Dayra and her family earned the right to immigrate to California when she was 8. They arrived in Fallbrook at the age of 8 speaking almost no English. A decade later, Dayra graduates Heritage High School with a 4.6-grade point average and having aced six Advanced Placement Courses as a senior and earning class Valedictorian honors.

Success, she says, can be summed up in one word: determination.

"Fear of failing is a great motivator," Dayra said. "I learned from my mom and dad's sacrifices. I knew my parents could not afford to send me to college so I pulled all-nighters to earn good grades."

As part of her community service, Dayra worked to form the Heritage High School "Make-A-Wish" program, which raises money to fulfill the desires of children with life-threatening illnesses. The group raised enough money to send a girl to Disneyland. She also took part in the "Patriot Olympics," a school initiative to raise money for special education programs and to support impoverished children in Kenya.

*Sonia Singh, 18; California Military Institute

Sonia will attend UC San Diego and major in bio-engineering with the ultimate goal of becoming a research scientist or physician to find cures for dreaded diseases like cancer. The daughter of immigrants from India, Sonia earned class Valedictorian honors at CMI and graduated with a 4.3-grade point average.

"I love my school," Sonia said. "It taught me discipline and made me love giving back to the community. I'm excited about being given the opportunity to excel in college."

Sonia volunteered at Riverside County Medical Center, delivering meals to patients and providing pillows and blankets—little things that comforted them in time of distress. She also raised \$5,000 in funds from her temple to help victims of natural disasters.

CMI principal Michael Rhodes described Sonia as "an amazing, humble, kind and helpful human being who cares more about others than herself."

"I could not be happier for and more proud of anyone," Rhodes said.

Sonia said her favorite subject is, not surprisingly, biomedical sciences, which require students to diagnose patient symptoms and search for a solution. She also is a member of the CMI Medical Club, which concentrates on the study of human body systems and emergency care. Her hobbies include photographing plants and landscapes and painting flowers, especially roses.

Sonia said she has taken a lesson from Rhodes and one of his favorite sayings: "The last four letters of American are I can."

Sonia is fluent in Punjabi and Hindi.



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