

Mendoza Rides Carr to ASU Diploma

This San Angelo Standard-Times story ran on the day of ASU's December commencement. It is a touching illustration of how a gift like that made by Robert G. Carr and Nona K. Carr to Angelo State University can touch lives and families for years. The story is reprinted with permission of the Standard-Times.

by Jared Schroeder



Norberto Mendoza Jr.

Norberto Mendoza Jr.'s mother greeted him with a simple white envelope as he walked in the door.

Taking the letter into the kitchen, the La Feria High School senior noticed the blue and gold Angelo State University logo and figured it was more of the college literature he'd been receiving from schools.

Sitting at the kitchen table, he opened the letter, discovering it held more than information about the school. It held a key to his future.

The letter informed the valedictorian from the small, low-income town near the Mexican border that he had earned a Carr Academic Scholarship from ASU.

"I opened it, and I was just amazed, truthfully, that I'd gotten that opportunity," he said in his soft, but enthusiastic tone as he and his father sat in an upstairs lounge in the Houston Harte University Center. "I told my family later, I wasn't sure it was for real."

The scholarship has paid for tuition, books and some living expenses that his family could not have afforded. It also has given

Norberto Jr. a chance to be the first male in his family to graduate from college.

Now a senior animal science major poised to graduate with honors with 390 other ASU classmates today in the Junell Center, the impact of that one day remains powerful - especially for Norberto Jr.'s father.

The man with a kind, humble attitude began to cry when he recalled the gift his son had been given. Norberto Mendoza Sr.'s tears caused his boy to tear up as well, and the two, always in unison, each pulled a handkerchief from their pocket and dabbed their tears.

Once composed, Norberto Sr., who grew up farming in Mexico and works as a handyman now, said he could never have sent his boy to school had it not been for the scholarship.

"It was a real good experience to hear about that," he said, "when you don't have no money or other way to pay a college."

A new friend

Grateful for the opportunity his son had received, Norberto Sr. still had some trepidation about putting so many miles between his child and the rest of the family.

"It's too far," the father remembered saying as he sat near his son on the ASU campus. "It's hard but there's nothing else you can do. I'm afraid. 'Let's try it,' that's what I told my son."

Willing, but still afraid for his son to be on his own in a strange town and away from the tight family unit in La Feria, Norberto Sr. worried about his boy.

That's where Carlos Cantu, a counselor at La Feria High School and a member of the Pan American Golf Association, comes in. Cantu contacted a PAGA friend in San Antonio who knew Ernest Perez, president of the San Angelo chapter of the PAGA.

Perez was happy to help.

"This family didn't want to part with him," Perez said from his north San Angelo home. "They were afraid for him to come here. This family, they are a very humble, close-knitted family."

Father and son first met Perez when the pair borrowed a pickup to come to San Angelo for an ASU preview weekend.

Perez said he was impressed when he first met Norberto Jr.

"Here was a kid who really had a desire to go forward and study," he said. "He's a level-headed kid. The family was so close. They didn't want to let go of this kid. I told him 'Norberto, your kid's going to be all right.'"

Norberto Jr. and Sr. returned to San Angelo when school was about to start that August, but the trip took a little longer than they expected. The used car they had purchased for Norberto Jr. overheated in Laredo, but the Mendozas quickly fixed it.

Hours later, on Highway 83, about 12 miles from Junction, their journey was stopped by a flat tire. Without a tire iron or jack, the Mendozas were stuck on the side of the road for about four hours.

The delays began to wear on Norberto Jr. "It was hard for me," the younger Mendoza said. I was thinking "maybe we shouldn't come up here."

Eventually, the pair arrived in San Angelo and got Norberto Jr. moved into the dorm. With bus ticket in hand and heavy hearts, the Mendozas went to the bus station to say goodbye.

"He came up here, and he had to leave me," the younger Mendoza said, we went to the train station "but I couldn't let him go."

So, the elder Mendoza stayed the night with Perez, humbly asking his new friend for a small space in the garage.

"You give me a little place in the garage," the elder Mendoza recalled saying as the memory of Perez's kindness brought tears to his eyes. "He wouldn't let me."

Perez convinced Norberto Sr. to stay in his guestroom, but the father did not want

to take advantage of the man's kindness.

"The first night," Perez said. "He didn't even sleep in the bed. He slept on the floor. He didn't know how to be treated that way."

The Mendozas said they are very grateful for Perez's help.

"Mr. Perez has helped us so much," the younger Mendoza said. "There is no way we can ever repay him."

The respect is mutual for Perez, who has been amazed by how close the Mendoza family is and how resourceful they have been - never once asking him for money.

"There's nothing impossible for them," he said. Norberto Jr. "has such a wonderful charisma. He calls me just to see how I'm doing. We have been real close. I'm proud of what he's done."

Staying close

Separating father and son might have been the greatest hurdle for the Mendozas.

Norberto Sr. began to cry when he considered being away from his boy, soon his son teared up too.

"We've always been near each other," the elder Mendoza said. "I want to stay here forever, my son's over here."



President James Hindman congratulates the new graduate.

Norberto Sr. has spent the last few weeks doing odd jobs around San Angelo and helping his son get settled into a small trailer in Grape Creek.

"He finds little jobs," Perez said of Norberto Sr. "Those people are struggling every day to sustain themselves. They do everything. They are mechanically inclined for anything. It's a beautiful family."

- Please see *Mendoza*, page 15



Ernest Perez, Norberto Mendoza Jr. and Norberto Mendoza Sr. celebrate commencement.

Mendoza continued from page 5

Norberto Jr. said he and his father speak on the phone, as least briefly, often when they are apart, but even when he missed his home and family the most, he never considered quitting.

"There was a few times I kind of just wanted to, not quit, I told myself quitting is not an option, but a few times I wanted to go home and stay awhile," he said.

His upbringing has helped him appreciate the opportunity he's had to get an education.

"One thing I see, kids whose parents have money and they've always been handed everything. They kind of take it for granted. Me and my family have always suffered for everything we have. I know what a great opportunity it is to be here. Because of that, I know I want to get my education. I want better, to help out my family and all that."

Norberto Jr. will graduate with a degree in animal science and will continue to benefit from a Carr scholarship as he returns to ASU immediately to begin a master's degree that likely will focus on animal nutrition.

The elder Mendoza said he wants to move his family to San Angelo, so they can be closer to his middle child. Norberto Jr. has two siblings, one who is older and in the military and another who has graduated from high school and is living in La Feria. The two said convincing the younger sister to move away from her friends would be the biggest challenge.

Whatever the outcome, Norberto Sr. is proud of his boy. Before he can even begin to describe how happy he is with how successful his son has been, he must look down and cry, just a little, and then pause until he regains his composure.

"He makes me proud, happy," he said through the tears. "Many times it's hard. When they started school I didn't imagine this thing happening (graduation)," he said. "I try to help him any way I can."