

Nonprofit aids Marin high school graduates in reaching college dreams

Jim Staats

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Angelica Quirarte, a Novato High student, will graduate Friday and is the first in her family to enter college. (J photo / Jeff Vendsel)

Eight years after arriving from Mexico barely able to speak five words of English, Novato High School senior Angelica Quirarte will graduate this week with numerous accolades and be the first in her family to enter college.

"My parents didn't get to go to college, or my grandparents," said Quirarte, 18, of Novato. "This is a big deal."

Quirarte said in addition to a lot of hard work and perseverance, the nonprofit Marin Education Fund was instrumental in achieving her college dream through mentoring, financial aid and other

assistance including college visits.

She was among some 50 graduating high school seniors - and more than 200 students overall - aided by the San Rafael agency created to help local students and their families through college graduation.

The agency's Summer Application Institute on the Dominican University campus has helped more than 450 underprivileged students through the application process since it began in 2000. The week of test preparation, writing workshops and financial aid planning in a college atmosphere sets groundwork for a year-long mentoring program for high school seniors.

"They contacted schools and kept me in touch with my mentors and my teachers," said Quirarte, whose workload included community service at local cancer groups and a Latino radio station. "They've basically given me the tips to go to college."

Quirarte, who will study sociology at the University of California at Santa Barbara, said it will be difficult to leave her parents and two younger brothers. In 2002, she almost lost one brother who had to have a tumor removed from his ribcage.

"I would come home from school and baby-sit and take care of him until my parents came home," said Quirarte, whose studies earned her recognition from the California Scholarship Federation and the local chapter of the American Association of University Women.

Jessalyn Fitzgerald, 17, a senior at San Rafael High School, earned a Marin Education Fund scholarship and entry into its Summer Institute along with Quirarte. Fitzgerald also will achieve a family first when she enters college this fall.

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"I think my mom is more excited for me to go to college than I am," said the San Rafael native. "She's excited now about graduation, but right after she'll be very excited about college."

With a single mom, absent father and out-of-state sibling, Fitzgerald benefited from years with Big Brothers Big Sisters of America before recent mentoring through the Marin Education Fund.

"It's been challenging at times, but it is what you make of it," said Fitzgerald, who will study political science at Sacramento State University.

She said the education fund "was there when I needed to have help for random things and morale support.

"To go through a stressful time in life without stress, it's fun."

Fund president Kim Mazzuca took pride in the graduates' accomplishments.

"Our goal is quite simple: to help those students who dream of college but lack the financial resources to get to college and graduate," she said. "And with the generous support of our community, that is what we will do with these students."

In addition to mentoring programs, Bay Area college campus tours and student workshops, the fund has awarded annual scholarships ranging from \$1,000 to \$5,000 to students of low-income households through contributions of individuals and community groups.

GRADUATION SCHEDULE

Wednesday

San Andreas High, Larkspur, 4:30 p.m.

Thursday

Redwood High, Larkspur, 4 p.m.

San Rafael High, 5 p.m.

Tamalpais High, Mill Valley, 6 p.m.

Terra Linda High, 6 p.m.

Friday

The Branson School, Ross, 2 p.m.

Sir Francis Drake High, San Anselmo, 5 p.m.

Novato High, 5 p.m.

San Marin High, Novato, 7 p.m.

Tomales High, 8 p.m.

* Marin Catholic High graduation was June 4; Marin Academy graduation was June 6; Marin Alternative Education graduation was June 9

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