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Juarez's student intellectuals win teaching awards

School's four Golden Apple scholars are the most within CPS

By MICAH MAIDENBERG
Editor

Four students at Benito Juarez High School, 2150 S. Laflin, have been named Golden Apple Scholars, an award that will provide them with annual tuition assistance and instruction from veteran teachers during the summers. The students, in exchange, must commit to teaching for five years at a "school of need" in Illinois.



Erica Zuniga, Ruben Sanchez and Nancy Barajas were recipients of Golden Apple Scholar awards.
MICAH MAIDENBERG/Staff

The Juarez winners are Nancy Barajas, Erica Zuniga, Ruben Sanchez and Erica Loburgio.

Jim Sorenson, executive director of the Golden Apple Foundation, the group that chooses the scholars, said 800 students applied for this year's program. The foundation, largely supported by a grant from the Illinois Student Assistance Commission, has been making the designation and working with prospective teachers for 20 years. Around 1,000 Golden Apple Scholars are teaching in Illinois or readying to enter the profession, Sorensen said.

"We are aiming for them to teach in schools of need, hard to staff schools, schools with large minority populations and low to mediocre scores," Sorensen said.

During a recent interview, Barajas, Zuniga and Sanchez talked about their motivation to teach and their pursuit of an education at Juarez. The school, they said, is burdened by stereotypes that that Latinos do not care about education and Juarez is not a school college-bound students attend.

"People underestimate Juarez, they think it's gang bangers and bad students basically," Zuniga said. "But it depends on you, you're the one who makes the decision to go with the bad group or follow with your education and get involved."

Barajas, whose grade point average is 4.4, said she was not even sure she wanted to go to

Juarez when she was looking at her high school options.

"I admit it-I did not want to end up at Juarez. That's the last option to look into but my brother came here and he said it really depends on you," she said. She grew, however, to love the school.

All three of the students have roots in Pilsen and grew up in Spanish-speaking households, helping their parents interpret American culture and the English language. Zuniga, whose father works as a cook and whose mother works in factory jobs, said her family motivated her to work hard in school.

"I don't think it's fair to let your family down after all the hard work they've put into you, so you could be something in the future," Zuniga said. "So you can prove to others not just because you're Mexican or the stereotypes, you could be a role model to others who think it's not possible."

Sanchez, a Juarez senior bound for the English department at Denison University in Ohio, ultimately wants to be a writer. He said he likes debating interpretations of literature and writing, arguing for his perspective. A favorite recent read was Jon Krakauer's "Into The Wild."

Eventually, he wants to return to Pilsen and teach at Juarez.

"It's just like this stigma attached to Hispanics that they don't value education," Sanchez said. "And after a while of hearing that all your life it kind of starts to put you down but we always managed to fight through."

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