

Marathon High School girl plans for Ivy League Future

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Princeton. Harvard.
Princeton? Harvard?

The search for just the right university weighs heavily on the mind of Marathon sophomore Graciela Mendoza.

For Mendoza, the choice is more about personal fit than the prestige of Big House academia.

“I know I want to go to either Princeton or Harvard,” she said.

“I need to investigate the political science programs at both and then make my decision.

Already accepted for a one month internship as an aide for United States Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen in June, Mendoza has started building an impressive resume. After her return from internship with Ros-Lehtinen, she hopes to attend a summer school program hosted jointly by Princeton, Stanford and Yale. Held on the Princeton campus, the program is designed specifically for high school students interested in law.

Mendoza’s interest in politics started with a chance conversation with local attorney, Richard Malafy, a speaker for Marathon Middle School’s Career Day in the spring of her eighth grade year.

“I asked him if he ever had interns. He said never had, so I asked if he would be interested and he said, ‘Sure!’”

Three months later at the start of the next school year she stepped into his office ready to work.

“I was actually intent on pursuing a medical degree. My cousin was doing graduate work in medicine and it sounded interesting. Basically I wanted to follow her tracks,” she said

“I don’t know why I asked Mr. Malafy about an internship in law when I did. I guess I was caught up in the excitement about the law. The experience with Mr. Malafy was great though. I got a good feel for law.”

When an invitation arose for her to attend a medical seminar for high school students at Nova Southeastern the following summer, she took the opportunity. But it was a chance session in new medical technology and law at that same summer program that got her hooked back to law.

“I realized my true attraction was to politics and debating,” Mendoza said.

Since then, she's been on a tightly-strung course to meet her goals. She's on the "A" honor roll at Marathon High and taking the full contingency of honors level courses. In addition she takes evening dual enrollment courses through Florida Keys Community College, maintains active membership in academic societies and community service clubs, holds the office of treasurer of her sophomore class and plays on the high school soccer team.

Working closely with Marathon High's college and career counselor Robin Lynne, Mendoza has been able to map out her future.

"Graciela is always in my office," Lynne said. "If I come up with an idea or a new lead for a program or a scholarship, she's right on top of it following up. That's pretty unusual for a sophomore to be that focused."

Friend and fellow high school and dual enrollment college student, Yanelis Diaz can attest to Mendoza's suitability to a career in debate and politics.

"Graciela's great at debate. She even convinced one of our teachers to give us an open-book test," she explained, "and he's really strict."

Through careful budgeting, Mendoza has been able to save enough money from her job as a part time busser at a local Marathon restaurant and local donations to afford each career specific summer program as it comes along.

Her plans don't stop at acceptance to a top tier school, though. Ultimately, she has her sights set on a career as a United States senator.

"I know my success depends on networking along with a good solid education," she said.

"My grandparents always stressed the importance of education."

As the granddaughter of Edmund Earl Carty and the late Grayce Carty, who was the first black registered nurse in Florida, Mendoza has benefited from high expectations and a solid support system her whole life.

Now living with her grandfather, she finds herself following a different set of tracks than those she originally anticipated. Her mom, Carty's daughter Leslie, was an aide to then-U.S. Congresswoman Dante B. Fascell when she was in high school.

"My grandma always taught me to reach for the highest," she said "Both my grandpa and my grandma always told me that the key to everything in life is education."

Her grandparents taught her the importance of giving back to her community as well.

“I’ve had wonderful encouragement and financial support from our community,” she explained. “I want to make a huge impact in our country, to give back to our community and make Marathon proud – and for my family to know that their hard work paid off.”