

# USF Latino Scholarships

## Provide New Opportunities for More Than a Decade

BY MARY ELLEN COLLINS

“Johnny didn’t make it into the first round.” According to Patsy Feliciano, coordinator of USF’s Latino Scholarship Program, Johnny Suarez was one of many deserving students vying for a limited number of scholarships. But fortunately, he was next in line when Feliciano got word of a brand new scholarship one week before this year’s awards program.

The City of Tampa Hispanic Heritage Committee wanted to establish a fund in memory of Lois Marrero, a police officer who lost her life in the line of duty last year, and they wanted it to be able to benefit a student immediately.

Coincidentally, Johnny’s father, Sylvio Suarez, had been a twenty-year city of Tampa employee before passing away two years ago. Feliciano thought it sounded like an ideal match between student and scholarship sponsor, the Committee agreed, and Johnny got a happy ending.

José Valentine, a Committee member who presented Johnny’s award at the Latino Scholarship Awards Program on August 20, knew Sylvio Suarez well.

“We used to work together-trimming and planting trees for the city. He talked about Johnny all the time, since he was a little boy, about taking him to baseball games and what movies they’d seen together. Having Johnny be the first recipient of the Lois Marrero Memorial Scholarship is a *total* coincidence, but it’s a blessing for me to know that we’re helping Sylvio’s son.”

Johnny, a freshman majoring in communications with plans to go into TV or radio broadcasting, says with a huge smile, **“This scholarship will help immensely with all of the costs of going to school. It will help me feel like I’m not up against the wall.** It’s also a good motivator to know that I have to follow through and do well because these people will be watching me and counting on me.” Johnny’s story is just one example of the Latino Scholarship Fund’s success.

In 1992, The USF Latin Community Advisory Committee, a group of community leaders who assist the President on Hispanic issues, created the Latino Scholarship Fund in an effort to meet a very specific challenge.

According to the US Department of Education, *only 70 of every 1000* Hispanic children who enter the educational system in grade one, go on to obtain a college degree. Obstacles to improving the educational status of college-age Latinos include lack of financial resources, lack of Latino role models and mentors, and the limited availability of Spanish-language information and services about higher education.

For those who do complete a college degree, opportunities are plentiful. U.S. businesses are seeking the best and brightest bilinguals to lead the way in expanding overseas markets; and professions like health care and education have a growing need for bilingual professionals to serve Spanish-speaking populations.

The Committee’s goal in establishing the scholarship program was to seek partnerships with local individuals, businesses, and organizations in order to provide renewable scholarships and mentoring experiences to deserving area Hispanic students.

Groups or individuals who want to name a scholarship invest a minimum of \$1,500 a year for four years in order to sponsor a freshman



Latino Scholarship recipients and honorees are acknowledged at this year’s awards program.  
PHOTO: COURTESY OF USF LATINO SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

throughout his or her college tenure; or invest a minimum of \$2,000 a year for two years to sponsor a transfer student. In addition to these named scholarships, there are 16 endowed scholarships that generate financial support in perpetuity.

The staff selects scholarship recipients based on financial need as well as academic merit; and then tries to match the student’s major with the sponsor’s personal or business interest.

The mentoring component distinguishes this program from other scholarship programs.

**“Our donors make a commitment to give both financial and moral support,” says Feliciano. “They provide internships and networking opportunities as well as career and personal advice. For some students, they are professional role models, and for others they become like members of their family.”**

The Ybor City Rotary Club has just begun sponsorship of its third student, Roberto Fuentes, a freshman majoring in International Business. Fuentes is from Mexico, where he lost his father when he was two years old, and his mother when he was thirteen. At fifteen he came to Florida where his maternal uncle adopted him, and he went on to excel at St. Petersburg’s Northeast High School.

**“Getting this scholarship is like a reward,”** Fuentes says quietly. **“It shows me that all of my hard work and studying paid off. Without the scholarship, I probably couldn’t go to college.”**

Lew Kaminga, a member of the Rotary Club’s scholarship committee, says Fuentes’ sentiment is a common one. “It’s gratifying to hear these stories, and it’s quite exciting to help and mentor students who wouldn’t ordinarily get a chance at a college education.”

Lazaro Sosa, the Rotary Club’s first scholarship student, is currently a translations engineer with Sprint. He remains in touch with Kaminga, and has only praise for his mentor’s personal support.

“Lew and the Rotary Club were like a family. When I had a severe car accident in my sophomore year, they were there. I injured my back and could barely walk, and I probably would have given up on school if they hadn’t been behind me. I used them as my reason to keep on going.”

This personal connection was evident at the Scholarship Awards Reception, where sponsors and students exchanged kisses and hugs as often as handshakes. Judging by the number of students who were holding hands with their sponsors, it was clear that some of these relationships had grown far beyond simply handing over a check.

The Latino Scholarship Program has awarded almost \$1,000,000 to 100 students in the past eleven years, but the need remains great.

“Many of our students got here in spite of incredible obstacles,” says Feliciano. “We watch them go on to become successful physicians, dentists, bankers, lawyers, engineers, teachers, and business owners, and that inspires us to work even harder to provide assistance to every student who needs it.”

*For information about investing in the future of Latino students by participating in Latino Scholarship Program, please contact Patsy Feliciano, Program Coordinator, at (813) 974-7124.*