

Wired for Success

By Matt Alderton

In the wake of victory, four undocumented students have their eyes on education.

Nineteen-year-old Oscar Vazquez likes school. He spends his free time working on his 1995 Mitsubishi 3000GT and racing it at the local racetrack. He works in construction and enjoys spending time with his friends.

In many ways, Vazquez is a typical teenager, but in other ways he is quite extraordinary. In 2004, he and three fellow students—Luis Aranda, Cristian Arcega, and Lorenzo Santillan—entered the Marine Advanced Technology Education Center's Remotely Operated Vehicle Competition, a national underwater robotics contest sponsored by the Office of Naval Research and NASA, among others. The four students from Carl Hayden Community High School, located in one of Phoenix's most economically disadvantaged neighborhoods, pitted their robot "Stinky" against state-of-the-art creations. They competed against college teams from top-tier schools throughout the country, including the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)—and they won.

"We were totally shocked,"

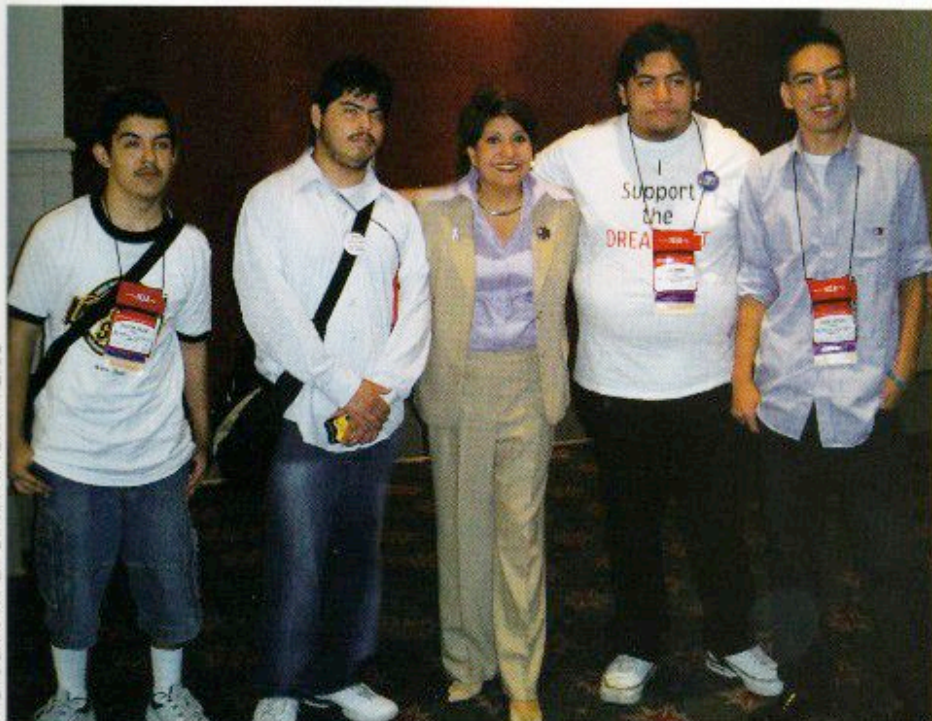
says Fredi Lajvardi, a teacher at Carl Hayden and one of the robotics team's coaches. "It was our first year entering the competition and we beat MIT."

Their victory, however, was bittersweet. Vazquez and his teammates are bright, hardworking, ambitious students, who happen to be undocumented Mexican immigrants. While most students could proudly display their achievement on a college application, for these four, college isn't even an option.

Target: College

Vazquez came to the United States with his parents in 1998, at the age of 12. He wants to be a mechanical engineer and dreams of earning a college degree. Because of his immigration status, however, the road to college has not been easy. He comes from an inner-city school where 93% of the students are Hispanic and where most participate in a federally-assisted lunch program, according to Lajvardi. Students don't necessarily have the money to pay for tuition, and without U.S.

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The award-winning Carl Hayden Community High School team meets with NCLR President Janet Murguia. The four Phoenix students defeated top-tier college teams for the prestigious Marine Advanced Technology Education Center's Remotely Operated Vehicle Competition.

citizenship they do not qualify for federal student aid—nor are they eligible for most merit-based or private scholarships, despite their academic achievements.

Still, Lajvardi says, a little determination goes a long way. Vazquez is proof. He graduated from high school in 2004 and took a year of classes at a local community college. He took another step toward his goals this fall when he started full time at Arizona State University. Paying his way is a scholarship from the La Vida Robot Scholarship Fund, made possible by a flood of private donations made after a *Wired* magazine article introduced the students to the country early this year.

"I didn't know there was so much support. It was completely unexpected," says Vazquez, who spent his high school career enrolled in the Reserve Officers' Training Corps, with the false understanding that he would gain

residency if he joined the military.

"When everyone treats you like you're documented, you kind of forget that you aren't," Lajvardi says. "It was like a slap in the face when Oscar realized he was undocumented. He really felt cheated, lied to. He felt like society misled him."

The robotics club at Carl Hayden, and the competition in particular, helped restore the students' faith in their futures. Vazquez hopes to finish his degree at ASU within five years. Aranda, who also graduated in 2004, works as an office clerk and hopes one day to open his own restaurant—soon he will be taking courses at Scottsdale Culinary Arts College. Santillan also is considering becoming a chef, and Arcega plans to pursue an engineering degree.

"It showed all four students that they can do whatever they want to do if they put their minds to it," Lajvardi says. "That's the number one thing they learned." ■

Pursuing a **DREAM**

Oscar Vazquez, Luis Aranda, Lorenzo Santillan, and Cristian Arcega are just four examples in a nation that is home to more than 11 million undocumented immigrants, according to the Pew Hispanic Center in Washington, DC—many of them children who were brought to this country by their parents.

These children, like the students from Carl Hayden, face many obstacles in their journey into adulthood. Federal legislation, however, could help eliminate many of those barriers. Supporters of the "Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act," twice introduced in Congress, argue that it is unjust to hold children responsible for the choices and actions of their parents.

The "DREAM Act" is awaiting reintroduction in the 109th Congress. If passed, it would repeal a 1996 federal law that discourages states from giving undocumented immigrants postsecondary education benefits, unless similarly granted to U.S. citizens, and would give conditional legal status for six years to students who came to the United States before age 16 and who have lived here for at least five years. To qualify, students also must be of good moral character and have graduated from a U.S. high school or completed a GED in the United States. Students who complete two years of college, or who serve for two years in the U.S. military, would be eligible for a green card at the end of their six-year residency.

"We want to make it possible for the 65,000 undocumented young people who graduate from our high schools each year to receive in-state tuition rates and pursue their own dreams," Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-NY) said in a July speech at the National Council of La Raza's 2005 Annual Conference in Philadelphia. "We need to open the doors of college to immigrant children who came here, did well in school, and deserve to go on with their education."