



Former homeless student flourishes at MDC 1:45



EDUCATION

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'It's not impossible:' Once homeless student graduates from Miami Dade College

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The day Enrique Sepulveda filled out his application to Miami Dade College, he had to think hard about what to write down for his home address.

For many others, that would be a simple answer. But for Sepulveda, 19 in the spring of 2015, that was a difficult question. Should he provide his girlfriend's address, his old home address or the address of the abandoned home where he was squatting?

He had been living in a foreclosed home in Miami for two years, since his mother threw him and his sister out of their house. Sepulveda decided to write down the address of the abandoned home he took over.

Today, after living in the Camillus House shelter for the homeless for several months, he lives with his girlfriend, and says he is certain that enrolling in MDC was his best decision.

On Saturday, after two years of studying at the Wolfson campus, he graduated with an Associate of Arts degree, with a major in political science. And that's just part of his story.

Sepulveda, 22, was elected vice president of the student body at the Wolfson campus last year. He also won a scholarship to study in Indonesia this summer. He now plans to transfer to a state university, probably Florida State University. Then he wants to study for a masters' degree in public administration or join the armed forces.

"I've had to overcome a lot of obstacles," said the Miami native. "But people need to know that my story is not unique, that there are many people in my same situation."

More than 770 students who qualified as homeless registered at MDC between 2011 and 2017. That includes students who sleep outdoors or in shelters, those who spend the night on a friend's couch and those who sleep in their cars.

Florida state schools can waive university enrollment fees for students who provide evidence that they are homeless. Federal regulations also offer school fee reductions for homeless students.

Sepulveda, who recently left the homeless shelter, said he was too embarrassed at first to tell his story.

"Definitely, there's shame associated with homelessness," he said. "I've met a lot of people thrown out of their homes for being what they are, gays and lesbians whose parents don't want them."

Others wind up on the street when their parents die or because their parents have problems, like drug abuse, said Sepulveda, who has lived in the Camillus House shelter for seven months with 11 other young people, aged 16 to 24.

“This is a relatively new program. It started in October and the goal was to help our young people to be financially independent,” said Katherine Martinez, housing director at Camillus House. “Most of them became homeless because of issues of gender identity. Their families do not understand. Many have suffered physical and emotional abuse.”

Soon after he started classes at Wolfson, Sepulveda went to the campus office of Single Stop, a program that helps students in difficult situations. He was chatting with program coordinator Wendy Joseph when the dean of student life, Jaime Anzalotta, dropped by.

Anzalotta said he was late for a meeting.

“I was running, but I always try to get to know the students, especially when I see them in that office, because if they are there, it’s because they are going through a difficult time,” he said. “When I listened to some of Enrique’s story, I asked my assistant to cancel my meeting.”

They wound up talking for nearly two hours.

His father had abandoned the family when he was 2 and his sister, Destiny, was 1. “We’ve talked, but we don’t have a relationship,” he said of his dad.

His mother was very young, and the family had a difficult time, moving from one place to another in Miami-Dade. He would fall asleep in his classes and barely made it into high school.

Halfway through his senior year, in 2014, he tried to intervene in a fight between his mother, his sister and their stepfather. His mother threw the siblings out of the house. That’s when they ended up at the abandoned house. Destiny later went to live with her boyfriend.

After graduating from high school, Sepulveda worked in construction, landscaping and a hardware store. He earned enough to eat and pay the water and electricity bills on the abandoned home.

“That was until the day the people from the bank went there and changed the lock,” he recalled. “I went to the house of my former girlfriend’s brother, but after a time you become a burden.”

Although Sepulveda insists that his case is not unique, Anzalotta, who referred him to the Camillus House program, said his is a story of exemplary self-improvement.

“This young man had everything against him,” said Anzalotta, who became Sepulveda’s mentor and helped to find him a part-time job in the college. “Despite that, look at everything he has achieved.”

Sepulveda also participated in the Educate Tomorrow program, which awarded him the Indonesia scholarship. The Miami-Dade nonprofit, which works with MDC and other entities, helps young people aged 18 to 24 who are “in transition” — youths left homeless — and want to continue their studies.

But for now, all Sepulveda can think about is his summer abroad.

“This week I went to get my passport,” he said. “It’s something I never would have dreamed of before. I want to travel, to go as far from Miami as possible to learn and get a new perspective on life.”



Enrique Sepulveda, Vice President of the Student Government Association at Wolfson Campus, expresses his happiness during the Commencement Ceremony held at the James L. Knight Center on Saturday, April 29, 2017. His turbulent childhood included moving nearly half a dozen times around Miami-Dade County, avoiding gangs in high school, getting kicked out of his house at 18. **PEDRO PORTAL** - pportal@elnuevoherald.com



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