

Local teen awarded full-ride scholarship

By Rick Nathanson / Journal Staff Writer

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Iliana Esparza, center, on Friday learned she was the recipient of the four-year, full-ride Dream Scholarship to Blackburn College in Illinois. She is flanked on the right by her mother, Stephanie Andrews, and on the left by Linda Solomon, founder of the Pictures of Hope program. Standing at the rear is Justin Norwood, Blackburn's director of admissions. (Rick Nathanson/Albuquerque Journal ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. — Iliana Esparza will be fulfilling not only her own dream, but the dream of her mother, when she becomes the first person in her family to go to college.

On Friday, Esparza, 17, learned that she was selected as the recipient of the four-year, full-ride Dream Scholarship to Blackburn College, a small, liberal arts school in Carlinville, Ill. The scholarship is valued at about \$100,000.

Esparza is currently a senior at the Health Leadership High School, a state charter school with a curriculum that prepares students for careers in the health industry. She was among the classroom of students who participated in the Pictures of Hope program, which gifts students a starter camera, matches them with mentors who help them craft a top-20 list of their hopes and dreams for their futures, and then accompanies the students as they go off to capture photographs that represent those hopes and dreams.

Esparza's photo captured a homeless person sleeping while in a sitting position on a Downtown sidewalk. The caption, which also appeared on her top-20-list, was "My hope is to make a change in my community."

But first on her list was "To go to college."

"I had no idea I would even be able to go to college," she said. "I knew that if I went, I'd have to get student loans and then I'd be in crazy debt. I just figured there was no way, and my dream started to go downhill a bit. But after this," she said, looking at her photo and a certificate awarding her the Dream Scholarship, "my dream is on the way back up."



Iliana Esparza's Pictures of Hope photo captures a homeless man sleeping on a Downtown sidewalk, with the caption: "My hope is to make a change in my community."

Iliana said she wants to eventually become a social worker and work with children.

Justin Norwood, director of admissions for Blackburn College, said that in addition to the photo and ACT scores, the college looks at each student comprehensively. “Among the things we look for are grit, determination and drive, something that Iliana has plenty of. It’s a good indication she will be successful at Blackburn.”

Norwood also noted that the Dream Scholarship was awarded last year to another student from Health Leadership High School. That student, Caroline Baca, is now a sophomore and “is doing very well,” he said.

Iliana’s mother, Stephanie Andrews, said she was “beyond excited and very proud” of her daughter.

Tearing up, Andrews noted that the four-year scholarship provides Iliana with something that she would never have been able to give her. “This is a very big blessing to our family.”

Andrews said she was 15 years old when she gave birth to Iliana, the oldest of her four children. Andrews, too, had a dream. She wanted to become a pediatrician some day and was subsequently offered a scholarship to help her go to college. Instead, she decided that she needed to stay home to raise her children.

“My life was dedicated to being a good mom, and I guess it paid off with this amazing opportunity for my daughter,” she said. “So Iliana is not only fulfilling her dream, but mine as well.”