



University of Washington  
YAKIMA VALLEY

# GEAR UP

SUCCESS STORIES





Dear Reader –

On behalf of the University of Washington's Office of Minority Affairs, we are pleased to present this publication of Student Success Stories for the UW Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) Project. This program began in 1999 as a partnership between the University of Washington, seven Eastern Washington School Districts, the Yakama Nation Tribal School and a number of local and regional community partners. The program was funded by a federal grant from the U.S. Department of Education with local partners providing matching support.

Over the past seven years, UW GEAR UP has helped over 7,500 students learn about and prepare for college through educational activities such as instructional support, college visits, tutoring, field trips, test preparation and other academic assistance. The program has also served parents by providing information about college entrance requirements, and teachers through professional development activities.

We are grateful to the U.S. Department of Education for providing the funding for this program that had such a profound impact on the students of the Yakima Valley. We also wish to thank our community partners including the Yakama Nation, Yakima Valley Community College, Northwest Learning and Achievement Group, Yakima Valley Farm Workers Clinic - Northwest Community Action Center, and Microsoft.

The following student success stories are representative of the achievements of all our GEAR UP graduates. Congratulations to the UW GEAR UP Program staff, community partners, parents and family members, and teachers who have helped contribute to the success of these students. Your hard work and dedication has helped the University of Washington secure funding for two additional GEAR UP grants, allowing us to serve many more new students of the Yakima Valley well into the future.

Sincerely,

*Loueta Johnson*

*Director*

*University of Washington*

*Yakima Valley Gear Up*



The University of Washington GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) Project was funded in 1999 as a partnership grant with local school districts and community partners. This project is part of a national effort to help students from low-income families plan for and succeed in higher education. It is funded by a federal grant from the U.S. Department of Education.

This program has supported students in preparing them for higher education and provides activities, information and educational opportunities for these students and their parents. It is comprised of seven Central Washington State school districts, has served over 7,500 students, and has numerous partnerships with community organizations and institutions of higher education.

Throughout the school year and summer, UW GEAR UP has provided a multitude of services to students, parents, and teachers. Students received academic tutoring and participated in curriculum enrichment activities that focused on mathematics, reading, and writing. They also visited

college campuses, attended assemblies with motivational speakers, and participated in other related activities that served to encourage students in their pursuit of a post-secondary education. Parents received information and training on the Washington State Assessment of Student Learning (WASL), college entrance requirements, financial aid, and the college application process.

These activities were designed to meet the following three objectives of the national GEAR UP Program:

- Increase the academic performance and preparation for post-secondary education of GEAR UP students
- Increase the rate of high school graduation and participation in post-secondary education of GEAR UP students
- Increase GEAR UP students' and their families' knowledge of post-secondary education options, preparation and financing





## *Luis Ramirez*

**Luis Ramirez** began learning English from his older sister when he was 7 years old, and in 5th grade an English teacher helped him realize the fun of reading. Since those early times, he has known that he wanted to be an English teacher. He likes to read, loves the English language, and is passionate about punctuation

and grammar, and hopes to pass on this passion to his own high school students.

So becoming involved with the GEAR UP Program in 6th grade was a great opportunity for him. He said it was fun to talk about college. He remembers hanging out with his friends, talking about careers, possible colleges, how much money they could make, and when they would retire. Lori Febus, the GEAR UP Site Director for the Granger School District, has been there since the beginning. She said that with GEAR UP, students have had their world expanded with activities such as college campus field trips, job site visits, and guest speakers, and they are building relationships with other students sharing their experiences, goals, and dreams." Luis remembers learning dismal statistics about Latino men and educational attainment. That was the point when he made up his mind to attend college because he "wouldn't allow [himself] to become a statistic."

Even though he went on some field trips in middle school as part of the GEAR UP Program, he was very impressed with the enhancements to the program when he had an opportunity to be a GEAR UP mentor during his junior and senior years of high school. He helped middle and high school students learn computer skills, assisted on field trips to such places as University of Washington, Boulder Cave, and camping excursions. He also had the opportunity to listen to people from different professions who came to talk to the students, such as police officers and fire fighters. He thinks that GEAR UP provides a great environment to make new friends and have lots of fun while keeping busy in the summer time in a positive environment.

So when Luis completed high school this year with the help of the GEAR UP Program, he became the first in his family to graduate. His parents, both of whom have an elementary school education, are very proud of him. And he hopes to be a positive influence on his four siblings, especially his two-year-



*When Luis completed high school this year with the help of the GEAR UP Program, he became the first in his family to graduate.*

old sister. In fact, he already has words of wisdom for her: "Do good in school; don't hang out with the wrong crowd; don't forget about family; work hard and don't give up on your dreams; there is lots out there to experience and [he] will always be there to lead the way."

It is obvious how much Luis cares for his family. That is why it will be especially hard for him to leave them when he goes to boot camp in the spring. He has joined the Navy because he wants to travel and see the world for four years before starting college at Heritage University. He will live and work on a submarine, perhaps in Australia. Then he will return to the Yakima Valley to be close to family. He said that before participating in the GEAR UP Program, he didn't know what he was going to do with his life. He feels that the program opened the door for him to college and the Navy by offering him exposure to life's opportunities. He really took the message "you are the future" to heart. And now he hopes to share that message with his own English class in Granger. In fact, he reports that his high school English teacher, Mr. Maldonado, won't retire until Luis returns from the Navy, earns his teaching degree, and takes over his job! Lori Febus adds that she "would like Luis and all students to take the tools GEAR UP has given them and go out and make a difference in their own lives, the lives of their families, and the world as a whole, since the students are our future!" She wants them to not only gain knowledge about postsecondary education, but also to have the skills to be successful and confident in the world and thus continue to give back to their communities. And thanks to the UW GEAR UP Program, Luis is well on his way to making his own dreams a reality as well as fostering his potential to make a difference in the lives of so many of his future students.

*Since GEAR UP influenced Alida's path to college, Alida is now influencing her younger brothers and sisters.*

Achiever's Scholarship during her junior year by holding an open room forum after school on a regular basis to help with the application and essays. She was awarded this four year scholarship, which included a 4-day camp at WSU. This helped her decide this was the college for her. Mr. Mendoza then continued to help her navigate the school application process and she was awarded two more substantial four year scholarships from WSU. He said that he was one of the first people Alida told when she was accepted to WSU and he is extremely proud of her. "I know how hard she worked to give herself that opportunity. She will be tremendously successful."

While Alida acknowledges that she always had good grades, she said that GEAR UP and her high school experience have helped her prepare for the rigors of college life by teaching her time management. Being the student body president, participating in GEAR UP homework sessions after school, playing sports, and waking up early before school to cut asparagus have all helped her learn how to budget her time.

Now, she is not only the second person in her family to graduate from high school, but the first to attend college. And although her parents are sad to have her far from home, she said that they are excited and know that college is important because they "just want to see me succeed." She is considering a career in physical therapy, since she played three sports in school. In five years, she hopes to graduate from college and move back to her community. She would like to work for a physical therapy firm to gain experience, and then start her own business.

And since GEAR UP influenced Alida's path to college, Alida is now influencing her younger brothers and sisters. She said that a few of them are just getting started in the GEAR UP Program and her brother, who is currently a junior in high school, visited the WSU campus with her, and although he was impressed, he insists that he needs to look at all the options first before he makes his decision. The UW GEAR UP Program has made a difference in her life and is now helping her brothers and sisters.



*Alida Mendoza*

**Alida Mendoza**, a 19-year-old GEAR UP graduate of Mabton High School, can now officially call herself a Washington State University student. This August she has started her

first week of college life since graduating from high school in June. She is still adjusting to her new life, but is confident that she will succeed because of the support she has had from her school, the GEAR UP Program, and community programs.

Alida had been working in agricultural fields since she was 11 years old. She knew she did not like this type of work, but her father is a retired farmworker and her mother is a seasonal agricultural worker, so she was born into it. While she is one of 13 children, her older brothers and sisters did not pursue higher education, so all she knew was that she did not want to work in the fields for the rest of her life.

About this same time, she began participating in the GEAR UP Program. She said that the teachers at school helped her see that things could be different and that college was the best way to make her life better, and by high school, she was sure she was going to college. Mr. Mendoza, the GEAR UP Site Director for the Mabton School District, was instrumental in this decision.

Mr. Mendoza, who was also Alida's college preparatory advisor and her assistant softball coach, served as her mentor through the decision-making and application processes. She visited WSU with the GEAR UP Program and attended a college fair at the Sundome in Yakima. She said these activities were not only helpful, but fun and exciting. Mr. Mendoza helped her apply for the Washington State



# Toppenish SCHOOL DISTRICT

## Jennifer Alvisurez

**Jennifer Alvisurez** chose the University of Washington because “it’s the best in Washington and it can take [her] places.” She will definitely be going places as she pursues her dream of becoming a doctor, practicing as part of a foreign exchange program,

and then ultimately returning to the Yakima Valley to practice medicine where Spanish-speaking doctors are in high demand. Although she has had dreams of becoming a doctor since being exposed to the profession when her younger brother required an operation, she did not believe that dream was possible until she was a part of the GEAR UP Program in 6th grade. She said she constantly heard “college this and college that” from GEAR UP staff and when she had the chance to visit college campuses in 8th grade, she knew “this is the way I have to go.”

Conan Viernes, GEAR UP Site Director for the Toppenish School District, helped her come to this decision, and has been there for the entire journey. She was able to visit the University of Washington two times, as well as Washington State University and Central Washington University as part of the GEAR UP Program. Once she had decided on UW, Mr. Viernes always kept her informed of important dates and opportunities of interest to her. He mentored her through the university application process, and also helped her to become a Gates Millennium Scholar, a scholarship program that can pay up to ten years of education, and a Costco Diversity Scholar, a substantial 4-year scholarship program.

Mr. Viernes also told her about the Alliances for Learning and Vision (ALVA) program through UW. ALVA is a 9-week summer internship experience for entering University of Washington freshmen students from African American,

*“Just because you’re coming from a small town doesn’t mean you can’t make it in a big city.”*

Hispanic and Native American communities who are interested in pursuing studies in Engineering, Computer Science, Physical Sciences, or Mathematics. Jennifer was accepted into the program and completed it this summer, delighted that she was paid minimum wage for eight hours a day while getting to know the campus, meeting mentors, forging new friendships and experiencing dorm life. She said this will help her transition into her new life as a UW student and thanks Mr. Viernes and the GEAR UP Program for telling her about the opportunity.

This experience was particularly important to Jennifer who will move 160 miles from Eastern Washington to Seattle to begin her college life. Toppenish, a small, rural, agriculture town, is approximately a quarter the size of the population of the UW Seattle campus student body. So getting to know the city and the campus before beginning her studies there vastly improved her confidence about the move. Of course, having an older brother who is now a junior at UW to serve as a role model is helpful, too.

Before GEAR UP, Jennifer thought that going to college meant going to YVCC (Yakima Valley Community College), the local community college in her area. She did not know anything else existed. She said that GEAR UP helped her focus on life after high school. She had no idea about her future as she entered middle school, but the program helped her develop her sights on college. Now she realizes “anything is pretty much possible.” And she is about to join the roughly 10% of students on the UW Seattle campus from Eastern Washington in proving that “just because you’re coming from a small town doesn’t mean you can’t make it in a big city.”





## Mt. Adams *SCHOOL DISTRICT*

### *Jessica Vigil*

**Jessica Vigil** always knew she'd go on to college. Her grandmother who raised her often talked to her about her future schooling. Grandma, who only completed the 8th grade, knew that college could afford Jessica a better life. So when her grandmother passed

away during Jessica's freshman year of high school, she knew for sure she would make her grandma proud. And since she had been active in the GEAR UP Program since 6th grade, she had already made the first steps of exploring her options. Jessica had already visited the University of Washington campus two times for a weeklong stay. She said the first visit was "shocking" because there were so many kids from all different schools, but she enjoyed staying in the dorms and going on field trips in Seattle. She also had gone on many field trips as part of the GEAR UP Program, visiting sites such as museums in Washington and Oregon. This was important to her because she hadn't had the opportunity to travel much except with GEAR UP. She said she had known that "there was a lot out there, but [she] hadn't seen it; the GEAR UP field trips helped open [her] eyes."

So when Billie Valdez, the GEAR UP Site Director for Mt. Adams School District, and Jessica's assistant volleyball coach, told her about the chance to become a GEAR UP mentor for younger students during her senior year of high school, she jumped at the chance. Billie helped her apply and she began mentoring students four days a week in the computer lab, and helping out with the arts and crafts activities. She is impressed with how much the GEAR UP Program has grown since she began in the 6th grade. She said the program now offers so much more to middle school students, such as an after school computer lab, homework help, school supplies as needed, and of course, field trips. She will definitely encourage her younger brother, who is now 7 years old, to be active in the program. And as the first in her family to graduate high school, she hopes to serve as a mentor to him.

Now she will be the first in her family to attend college. While her brother will miss her and doesn't want her to leave home, she knows that by going to college, she will help show him that this could be his future, too. And the GEAR UP Program helped her to decide on a college. Those visits to UW helped her realize that she doesn't like big cities. Coming from White Swan High School, she was



used to very small class sizes and small town life. So when she visited Eastern Washington University in Cheney, she liked the "homey" feel of the campus and town, and knew this was where she would go. She plans to study criminal justice because she had a sister and a few friends who were in trouble with the law. She wants to practice as a probation officer or counselor because she "saw how it was for [her] sister and friends not be listened to." So she wants to offer help to young people who find themselves in the juvenile justice system.

Also, she plans to be involved in campus life at EWU. As someone who was a class officer, played three varsity sports, participated in Future Business Leaders of American (FBLA), and held a Future Farmers of America (FFA) officer position for three years, she is used to being a leader. Since she has had two knee surgeries, undergone physical therapy, and now takes medication for arthritis, she has to find a way to be active on campus other than through sports. She immediately noticed that EWU does not have an FFA program, so she is investigating how to start one on campus. And she will use her involvement in the College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP) to help her through the process. Thanks to her college exposure as part of the GEAR UP Program, and her grandmother's constant mentoring, she is well on her way to fulfilling her grandmother's dream of having her granddaughter graduate from college.

*Jessica had already visited the University of Washington campus two times for a weeklong stay. She said the first visit was "shocking" because there were so many kids from all different schools, but she enjoyed staying in the dorms and going on field trips in Seattle.*



## Rosita Benitez

**Rosita Benitez** hasn't made up her mind about a career yet. Will she be a spa owner, a kindergarten teacher, an office administrator, or a paralegal? While she's not yet sure of which path she will choose, she has chosen to go to college. She has been working with Oscar Galvan and Amy Pacheco through the Sunnyside School

District's GEAR UP Program since 7th grade. She remembers the time that she decided that college was a possibility for her: Any student who wanted to go on the GEAR UP field trip to the University of Washington was required to write an essay about why he or she wanted to go to college. At that point, Rosita hadn't given college much thought, but the process of writing the essay piqued her interest. After visiting several schools, such as UW, Washington State University, and Heritage University, she knew college was in her future.

Then life circumstances almost derailed these plans. She had to move to Seattle for her first two years of high school in order to help her older sister with bills and childcare. While she really liked Seattle, especially the diversity of cultures represented at her school, her grades really suffered. However, she returned to Sunnyside High School for her junior year, reconnected with Oscar and Amy in the GEAR UP Program, and improved her grades substantially.

Because she was interested in a teaching career, the GEAR UP Program staff told her about the Teacher Mentor program offered through University of Washington. She participated in this program following her junior year of high school. She spent over 90 hours in summer school playing games and singing songs with kindergarten students to teach them body parts, numbers, and ABC's. She also worked with 1st grade students to teach them math, and used her bilingual skills to help teach reading. She had the opportunity to live in the UW dorms for 1 week during the program and earned over \$4,000 to attend the college of her choice.

Then, during her senior year of high school, a recruiter from DeVry University came to her high school to talk to her class about the opportunities the university had to offer. She became interested in earning a business degree, and since she already knew she liked living in Seattle, she made her choice. Of course, it helped that she has an older sister, also a Sunnyside High School alumni, living in Seattle as she completes her final year at University of Washington in Business Administration with an emphasis in Marketing.



*In five years, she hopes to be a college graduate, on her way to owning her own business, and living in a bigger city than her hometown of Sunnyside.*

What do her parents think of all of this? They are really happy for her and are thrilled that their five children have had the opportunity to further their education, and that the GEAR UP Program was available to help them learn about their options. Rosita's father, a farmworker, and her mother, who packs fruit in a warehouse, had no opportunity to go to college in Mexico, which makes it all the more exciting that two of their children are currently enrolled in a university.

And Rosita said it all began in 7th grade when she had to write an essay for a GEAR UP field trip about why she wanted to go to college. Oscar Galvan, Gear Up Site Director for the Sunnyside School District, adds that "GEAR UP is an outstanding program that helped guide Rosita Benitez to push her goals to the next level, pursuing a college degree." Not only did GEAR UP inform her of the opportunity to participate in the Teacher Mentor program through UW, but this program also ultimately helped her with her senior project, a high school graduation requirement. Her project, entitled "Becoming a Kindergarten Teacher," consisted of a PowerPoint presentation with information about a teaching career. She reports that she was one of only five students in her graduating class to earn a perfect score on her presentation. Now she has taken those skills to college to explore other areas of interest. In five years, she hopes to be a college graduate, on her way to owning her own business, and living in a bigger city than her hometown of Sunnyside. But she will always remember her 7th grade GEAR UP essay and the doors it opened in her mind.



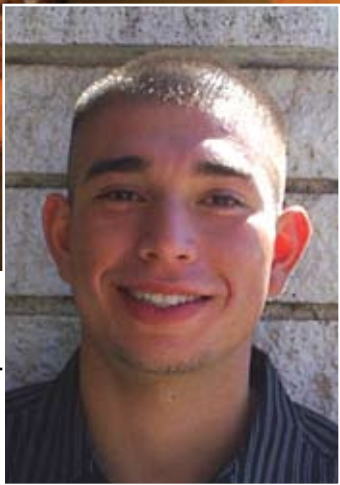
*"Field work definitely encourages you to get an education!"*

Because of all of the positive attributes of the GEAR UP Program, Junior has encouraged his younger brothers to participate as well. His 17-year-old brother, Jose, is now working as a GEAR UP Program mentor as Junior did. His 15-year-old brother participates regularly in GEAR UP activities, and he expects his youngest brother, who is now 10 years old, to participate when he starts 6th grade next year.

As for Junior, he has begun his first year of college this semester at Heritage University. Although he did not decide to definitely go to college until his final semester of high school since he was also considering a career in the military, he was able to work with a university counselor to earn a \$1,000 scholarship and enroll in the College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP). He said he had much encouragement to pursue higher education from many different people, including his boxing coach, his high school counselor, Mrs. Cruz who was his ESL teacher, Mrs. Griffin who he assisted in the school office as a teacher's assistant, and his mom and dad. And of course, his experiences as a GEAR UP mentor his senior year reinforced this message and helped him see the definite possibility of college. The message he has taken away from his life experience in the fields and his time with GEAR UP is that it is hard to survive without an education. And since he now lives in the United States where a university education is available to him, he will make use of this opportunity.

Now he is the first in his family to graduate high school and the first to attend college. Beverly Sevigny, Assistant GEAR UP Site Director for the Zillah School District, said, "Junior is honest, reliable, and mature. He will be a wonderful asset to any career he chooses to follow."

Junior is contemplating a career as a police officer or perhaps an emergency room medic, and is working for Wal-Mart while he attends college. He feels that having a good job will allow him to help his brothers succeed, too. Five years from now, he intends to have a career in either law enforcement or the medical field. He will not have to worry about living paycheck to paycheck and he will be able to take care of his parents so that they don't have to continue working so hard in the fields. Through Junior, the GEAR UP Program will have a positive effect not only on him, but also on his brothers, his parents, and a society who will benefit from a skilled police officer or medic.



*Zerafin Gonzalez*

**Zerafin Gonzalez**, otherwise known as Junior, began working in the agricultural fields when he was ten years

old and continued through high school. He remembers smelling the pesticides, and being hot and sweaty in the summer heat. "Field work definitely encourages you to get an education!" he said.

Junior was born in Mexico to parents who had only completed the 6th grade, and he moved to Washington State when he was eight years old. He took English as a Second Language classes and completed lots of homework to catch up. But he worked hard, caught up with his classmates, and by high school, served as a mentor to other youth. He worked as a teacher's assistant for the Best S.E.L.F. program during his junior year. In his senior year, he worked for the Zillah GEAR UP Program as a mentor to middle school and other high school students. He said he played games with them, helped them with homework, and went on many field trips, like bowling, roller skating, and a tour of Washington State University. He thinks that the atmosphere created by the GEAR UP Program makes it easier for students to concentrate on homework and to ask for help if they need it because there are always teachers close at hand to answer questions. Plus, having extra help makes it easier to finish your homework faster, he adds, so that there is more time for fun activities. Furthermore, he said that the GEAR UP Program motivated him to keep his grades up because good grades were a requirement to keep his job as a program mentor.



## Grandview *SCHOOL DISTRICT*

### Veronica Martinez

**Veronica Martinez** has known since she was a child that she wanted to attend college. Her mother, who stays home with the children, and her father, who works in the agricultural fields, both encouraged her to get a good education. But it wasn't until she participated

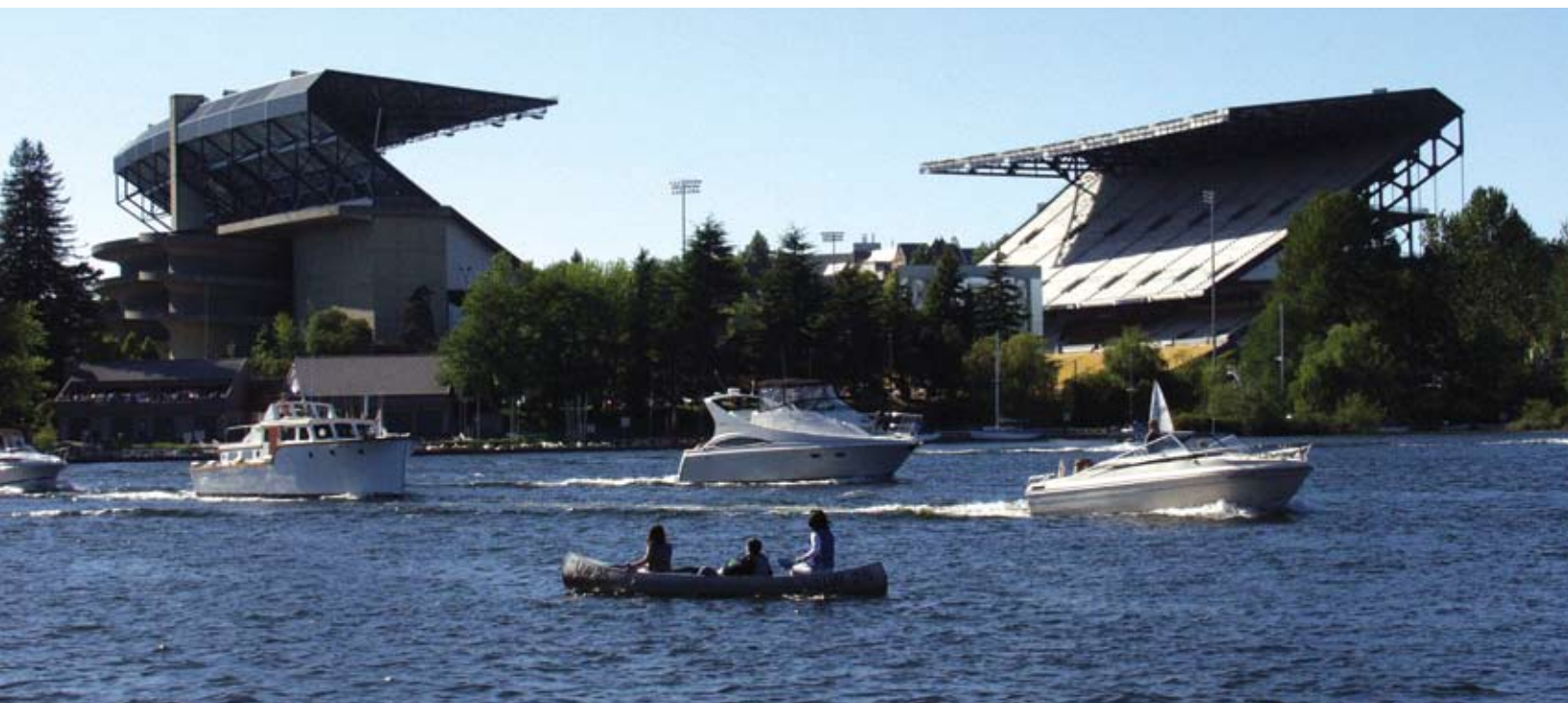
in the UW GEAR UP Program in middle school that she was exposed to the real possibility of going to college. She remembers learning how to use a computer, scanner, and other technology as part of a GEAR UP Program field trip. She enjoyed this so much that she knew she wanted to work in an office environment. This experience left her wanting to learn as much as possible about office work and technology. This GEAR UP field trip, along with other visits to Central Washington University, Eastern Washington University, and University of Washington where she was able to attend college classes and sleep in the dorms, really helped her to decide on attending a university.

Mindy Lopez, the GEAR UP Site Director for the Grandview School District, has been there since the beginning to see Veronica learn about college and come to this conclusion. Veronica said she began making an effort to be in class everyday and not miss a class if possible because she learned through GEAR UP that in college, you pay to be there to get an education. She wanted to develop this habit early.

She also learned that hard work is a necessity to succeed in college. Therefore, she participated in many community service projects through the GEAR UP Program, such as cleaning up public spaces. And when a Heritage University representative came to the high school and went through the steps of applying, Veronica knew this was the school for her. It was close to home, and she could work on her general requirements without having to decide on a career path immediately. She applied to many scholarship programs, such as Dollars for Scholars, Coins for College, and the Sea Mar Scholarship, and received them all.

Now Veronica has begun her first year at the university. Five years from now she hopes to have graduated from the university and be working somewhere in Washington State. She wants to stay in the state so that she can be close to her younger brothers and sisters, one of whom is currently a GEAR UP participant. She will encourage the others to participate in GEAR UP when they are old enough. After all, although Veronica had the dream to go to college since she was very young, it wasn't until her exposure through the UW GEAR UP Program that her dream became a reality.

*It wasn't until she participated in the UW GEAR UP Program in middle school that she was exposed to the real possibility of going to college.*





*PARTICIPATING DISTRICTS AND PARTNERS:*

- Grandview School District
- Granger School District
- Mabton School District
- Mt. Adams School District
- Sunnyside School District
- Toppenish School District
- Zillah School District
- Microsoft
- Northwest Community Action Center
- Northwest Learning and Achievement Group
- Yakama Nation
- Yakima Valley Community College
- Yakima Valley Farm Workers Clinic

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