

Ex-SCU janitor mops up honors as graduate

San Jose Mercury News (California)

June 13, 2002 Thursday F1 EDITION

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Section: B; Pg. 1; news

Length: 661 words

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Body

Having just poured himself a cup of coffee, Juan Rubalcava found himself surrounded by cafeteria workers at Santa Clara University. Weeks ago, they might have asked him to mop the floor, but those days are over.

"Congratulations," one of them said. When one worker looked puzzled and asked what the hullabaloo was all about, another one said, "He's graduating this week . . . from this school."

Not just graduating, but graduating magna cum laude with a degree in computer science and mathematics -- and on Saturday, only two days after his 34th birthday. Not a bad birthday gift for the former campus janitor and illegal immigrant.

"I'm sometimes surprised by the attention," Rubalcava said.

As America casts a suspicious eye toward immigrants after the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, this soft-spoken man with bright eyes under droopy eyelids is a quiet reminder of the millions of newcomers who did good things before him and could do well after him.

Jumps the border

I first wrote about Rubalcava in 1998. He recently had enrolled at Santa Clara through a reduced-tuition program for employees, four years after arriving at the Jesuit school to clean offices, classrooms and toilets, and 17 years after jumping the border from his native Mexico to pick fruit in Gilroy.

He since has become a U.S. citizen and somewhat of a hero to Silicon Valley's janitors, many of them Latino immigrants. On campus, however, he tried to simply blend in as a student during the day and to do his job at night, but separating his two lives wasn't so easy.

"It was not a nice pleasure sometimes to be seen by some of my classmates sweeping or cleaning restrooms," he said, adding that the encounters were more awkward than condescending. "Sometimes I wanted to be funny and told them that I worked cleaning up their mess."

Like most of Rubalcava's professors, the Rev. Dennis Smolarski didn't know one of his students was a janitor.

"I was walking to some offices one night when I saw him cleaning," Smolarski said. "When I realized he was a university janitor, I said to myself, 'This is somebody who is trying to take his God-given gifts and use them.' I admire him for that."

Rubalcava accumulated a 3.7 grade-point average and made the Phi Beta Kappa honors society. As an Epsilon honors student in mathematics, he spent two volunteer hours each week tutoring other students. His academic achievements become even more inspiring considering competition for his time and his disabled mother's illness.

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"The most difficult part was the time I had to take my mom to the hospital, had to go to work and had to study for a midterm examination at the same time."

While you could lump that crisis in the life-happens department, the university's maintenance office nearly ended Rubalcava's college education by switching him to the day shift. Only pleas from his professors and counselors to the university president's office stopped the transfer, but the unpleasant experience convinced him to hurry and graduate.

Concentrates on classes

He quit his janitorial job in September to study full time, relied on his sister, Araceli, for financial help, and completed his degree requirements in December. Ironically, all that bought him was a spot in the line of unemployed computer workers in a depressed technology economy. Since then, he's passed on one solid job offer from an Oregon company because the move would have been hard on his disabled mother.

Even so, he remains upbeat, wouldn't mind teaching math part time and already is thinking about a doctorate degree in math down the road. He occasionally is asked to sum up his path from illegal immigrant to magna cum laude, a question he turns into advice for other immigrants:

"Don't despair. These things happen slowly. Just keep working hard and studying what you love in school, and the doors of opportunity will open."

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Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: IMMIGRATION (90%); STUDENT HONOR SOCIETIES (89%); STUDENTS & STUDENT LIFE (89%); COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS (78%); EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION EMPLOYEES (78%); CITIZENSHIP (76%); TEACHING & TEACHERS (76%); GRADES & GRADING (76%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (74%); DISEASES & DISORDERS (73%); VOLUNTEERS (73%); MATHEMATICS (72%); HISPANIC AMERICANS (69%); SEPTEMBER 11 ATTACK (68%); TERRORISM (68%); COMPUTER SCIENCE (56%); TERRORIST ATTACKS (54%)

Organization: SANTA CLARA UNIVERSITY (67%)

Industry: COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS (78%); COMPUTER SCIENCE (56%)

Geographic: SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA, CA, USA (78%); SILICON VALLEY, CA, USA (73%); UNITED STATES (79%)

Load-Date: June 13, 2002