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MULTICULTURAL AFFAIRS

Hispanic Student-Athletes Honor Heritage While Connecting to Gardner-Webb Community

BY OFFICE OF UNIVERSITY COMMUNICATIONS ON SEPTEMBER 15, 2021



Eliel Cuesta and Jenni Escalera Study to Develop Their Skills to Help People

To our readers: Sept. 15 begins National Hispanic American Heritage Month (<https://www.hispanicheritagemonth.gov/>), sponsored by The National Park Service and its partners to pay tribute to the generations of Hispanic Americans who have positively influenced and enriched our nation and society. In celebration of the month, two Gardner-Webb students share how they honor their Hispanic heritage.

Written By Sariana Miranda-Rosado, '24, Intern for Communications

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C.—Since coming to Gardner-Webb University, both Eliel Cuesta and Jenni Escalera have grown to develop their culture around their new environment. Being minorities on a campus full of different cultures, they find ways to stand out and represent their heritage.



▲ Jenni
Escalera

Escalera, '23, of Rutherfordton, N.C., studies nursing and Spanish as well as runs every day to compete on the GWU cross country team. “When I came to tour Gardner-Webb, I automatically felt like I was at home,” she described. “I loved the atmosphere provided and the positive vibes everyone gave as I encountered them.” By pursuing a career in nursing, Escalera will be able to reach people from a wider variety of backgrounds and ethnicities, while also helping other Hispanics. She spends her free time reading poetry and taking care of her plants: Luka, an aloe vera plant, and Suzie of the succulent variety. “They help me connect with nature and my spiritual side,” she expressed.

Cuesta, '24, is focused on completing his communications degree along with developing his graphic design and photography skills. When he's not running up and down hills for track and field practice, he's on the football field and around campus taking photos—of the Runnin' Bulldogs football team practicing, friends enjoying campus life, or the landscape of beautiful Boiling Springs. In his downtime, Cuesta plays the saxophone. “It calms me down and lets me disconnect so I don't have to worry about all the things in my life,” he said.

As the oldest daughter, Escalera feels the responsibility of setting the stage for the success that is expected of her siblings in school and the proper representation of immigrant parents. The best thing about her life is her supportive parents who always have her back. Being a first generation Mexican-American is a lengthy assimilation process of adapting and learning the change in culture, language, and a new town. “My parents mean the world to me,” she affirmed. “They have given me everything to live the most comfortable life possible.”



▲ Eliel Cuesta

Cuesta is also the oldest of three children and paving the way for his first-generation siblings, who live in Lancaster, S.C. His hometown of Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, is the root of his drive to be better and do better, and to represent his family back home on the island. As a graphic design major, the characteristics of his culture help him maneuver through his classes. “We [Dominicans] are very visual learners and creative, so I think graphic design fits in well with that,” he acknowledged. Since moving to the United States at age 5, Cuesta and his family have kept their heritage alive by flying their native country’s flag at home. He also posts the flag in his room at GWU, so everyone knows his pride for the country where he was born. He also enjoys conversing in Spanish with many different people on campus.

The most important aspects of Hispanic culture to Escalera are also language and traditions. “I love speaking Spanish,” she asserted. “I am always trying to speak Spanish to my teammates and friends.” She believes this enables her to keep her native tongue present in her everyday life and represent her heritage on the Gardner-Webb campus. Teaching her teammates Spanish allows her to establish her community within Gardner-Webb. Once she goes into the work force, she will be able to guide those who are need of help and don’t speak English very well. Majoring in Spanish allows her to dive deeper into the history of her culture and the meaning of her language. In doing so, she has given herself a waterfall of information she can pass on to others. “I wanted to have the right background to provide Hispanics with as much help as possible,” she elaborated.

One more thing these two athletes have in common is embracing the friendly nature of their cultures that highly value family and connections. Cuesta and Escalera welcome everyone with open arms. They like to invite friends or teammates over for a fun night of games or TV shows and create a sense of community for everyone around them.



▲ Sarianna Miranda-Rosado

About the author: Sarianna Miranda-Rosado is an English major. Originally from Puerto Rico, she came to GWU from Fort Lauderdale, Fla. She is also proud to represent the Hispanic community at Gardner-Webb.

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