

New Mexico Activities Association Student-Athlete Spotlight



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Contreras Perseveres over Life's Challenges

By Tyler Dunkel, Sports Information Director at the NMAA

Fabiola Contreras, a senior at Cibola High School, moved to the United States from Costa Rica in third grade with her two older siblings after her mother married a U.S. citizen. It was not always easy for them in the "Land of Opportunity."

In addition to the culture shock of living in a new county, Contreras and her family also experienced emotional abuse by her stepfather. They soon found themselves homeless, in a country where they were not fluent in the language and her family members were without work.

"It wasn't just the experience of going through an abusive relationship with my stepfather and being homeless at one point but it was watching my mom and how she handled everything, which was really inspiring to me. Coming to a new country where the culture was so different was difficult. My mom never gave up and worked hard to provide for her kids, sometimes working three jobs, while having to live on someone else's couch and through it all she never once complained or cried in front of us. She continued to say that everything happens for a reason and I think that is what has driven me to always want to push for more and take on challenges because my life has been a challenge. So I think all those challenges have shaped me into the type of person and leader that I am today, with a never give up attitude."

She continued by saying, "When I came to the United States I could not speak or understand English at all. As a little kid I asked a lot of questions to try and learn the language. I also watched a lot of television. I started by putting small words and phrases together. To be a third grader trying to learn a completely new language taught me a valuable lesson as well that you cannot just wait for something to come to you. You have to be willing to go and put yourself out there to achieve your goals."

Beginning at age 11, Contreras started babysitting to help contribute to the family. However, through the most difficult times, Contreras refused to let her situation define who she was or what she would become.

"Obviously, growing up we didn't have a lot of money and like I said, I always felt bad asking my mom for money or for things because I knew we didn't have very much. So I decided to start babysitting to earn money to get those extra things I wanted so my mom didn't have to worry about trying to find a way to provide me with those items. I'm sure my mom was always worried that I didn't have as much as some of the other kids but even at a young age I understood our financial situation. So I started babysitting so I could buy those things and my mom didn't have to worry about it. It taught me the value of a dollar and hard work at a young age."

Fast forward to 2015; Contreras is now in her final year of



high school. She carries a 4.45 GPA and ranks eighth out of 404 students. Most of her class schedule is filled with AP and Honors classes. Since English was her second language, Contreras has faced the challenge head on, taking intensive writing courses, including AP Seminar, to improve her language skills.

She also joined the Cibola cheerleading squad and has been a varsity member since her freshman year. When asked what she likes about being a cheerleader, Contreras replied, "Being a member of the cheerleading squad at Cibola has been very rewarding. I basically went from doing nothing in middle school to being a part of a varsity team. I never really knew what it meant to be part of a team and it felt good to know I could be successful at a sport. Making the junior varsity team as a freshman, I felt like it was a great accomplishment but being moved to the varsity squad as a freshman meant I was a valuable part of the team."

She continued by saying that being a cheerleader has taught her a great deal about believing you can do anything. "I have learned so much as a member of the cheerleading team. I learned a lot about people in general because I really don't fit the typical mold that people think of when you think of a cheerleader. It just proved that anyone can do it."

Contreras is also involved in several other extra-curricular activities including National Honor Society and JROTC. As a member of Cibola's National Honor Society chapter, Contreras was elected to serve as secretary by her peers. She manages membership records for over 100 students, tracks attendance, community service hours and the chapter dues. She feels her experience in NHS has helped her build strong leadership skills that have carried over to other aspects of her life.

"I started in Junior Honor Society in middle school. I thought my leadership skills could be beneficial in a leadership role in NHS. Being involved in my community and giving back is something that was extremely important to me and I'm proud to be a part of it."

As a sophomore, Contreras earned the position of class commander in the JROTC program. Currently, she teaches the JROTC curriculum, schedules and runs practices, while maintaining the programs inventory.

"When I first came to JROTC, I knew nothing about the military. I think the biggest thing that drew me to join was that I'm a natural born leader. I liked the fact that JROTC taught you how to be a good leader. I have 22 other cadets looking up to me and that is a huge responsibility. It's a good feeling to know I'm a role model to these other students. It really inspired me to teach others to be great leaders and be involved. It doesn't matter what your background is because you can be successful in anything and that is what I try to teach the other cadets in our unit."

Contreras' contribution to her school, however, doesn't stop with just cheerleading, JROTC and National Honor Society. She has also found a way to give back on the academic side. Along with two other friends, Contreras identified the need for a math tutoring program at Cibola. She organized a committee of students to plan and staff the program, met with teachers to get materials and worked with the principal and Math department chair to find space. Within four months of starting the project, the math lab was fully operational, staffed with trained student volunteers, helping her fellow classmates.

"I've always been good at Math and I knew that a lot of students struggle in that area in school. We were already very fortunate at Cibola to have a writing lab, so I thought it would be a great idea to have a Math tutoring lab as well. So a few friends and I got together, along with one of our teachers who sponsored the lab, and started the process. The lab functions as a dual lab, where students can come and get help with Math but it also gives other students the experience of being a tutor."

Contreras plans to attend college in the fall of 2015, receiving a few scholarships already, including the NMAA Foundation El Richards/Francis Walsh Spirit Scholarship. "I'm caught between two schools, either Colorado State or the University of Tampa. Of course, UNM is an option as well. Because of my grades I have received a few scholarships. I want to go to medical school and hopefully be a surgeon."

No matter what path Contreras takes in life, one thing is for sure - her hard work and dedication will lead to great things.