



New Mexico Activities Association Student-Athlete Spotlight

Leiandra Lucero Rises to the Top by Overcoming Life's Obstacles

By Tyler Dunkel, Sports Information Director at the NMAA

One moment in a person's life can alter his or her direction. For Leiandra Lucero, that's exactly what happened on February 14, 2010. Around 9:00 p.m. that evening, Lucero and her parents, Justin and Melissa Cruz, were coming home from watching *The Book of Eli* at the local movie theater when they were t-boned by a drunk driver while turning at a stop light.

Lucero, who took the brunt of the 90 mile per hour impact on the driver's side, said the collision spun their vehicle 360 degrees before coming to a stop. She received 32 stitches in her forehead and four in her mouth. Luckily, everyone survived the accident but Lucero took this experience as an opportunity to make a difference.

Recently, Lucero was chosen to represent her school in a Life of an Athlete commercial, a program presented to member schools around the state that teaches students about making the right choices and the effects of alcohol and drugs on their bodies.

Lucero says she was honored to be a part of the commercial. "It meant a lot to me to be part of the commercial this year. Drinking and driving awareness is something that is very close to my heart. In 2010, I was hit by a drunk driver while riding in a car with my parents. It was a very traumatic experience for me and to have the opportunity to be part of the awareness about the effects that alcohol can have not only on your body but even when you get behind the wheel was something I embraced. Since the accident, I have taken every opportunity I can to give speeches about drinking and driving. I feel that if I can affect just one person or stop just one person from getting behind the wheel after drinking then I did my job."

She continued, "I think the younger we reach kids about the effects of alcohol the better. After the accident I used my experience to spread the word and also as therapy for myself. Last year I went to the state 4-H conference and talked about my experience. This event really shaped me into the person I am today and helped me become the leader I am. It's not just drinking and driving I want to stop but I want to help kids make the smart choice about drinking in general."

A senior at Maxwell High School in Maxwell, N.M., Lucero is involved in a variety of sports and activities at her high school, including volleyball, basketball, track and field, cheerleading and 4-H.

Lucero feels cheerleading might be one of the most important interscholastic sports because the cheer squad has a responsibility to be the leaders of school spirit and sportsmanship at sporting events. She believes the car accident and cheering has helped her become the person she is today.

"Being a cheerleader for your school, you have to be positive. Because of our small squad size it is hard, especially being the captain. It's our job to keep the crowds positive, whether we are winning or losing. At the same time, having a smaller squad, you can give each other constructive criticism and everyone understands that we are just trying to get better and do whatever we can to be the face of good sportsmanship and school spirit. Before I became a cheerleader I never



realized what an important role a cheerleader plays in the atmosphere of a game. It's our job to help keep the crowd positive and guide them throughout the game."

In 2013-14, Lucero was the team captain and one of just four students on the cheer squad and says, despite the small team, they really stuck together as a family.

"Even though we were a small squad, we were family and we had to get along with each other and not let people quit. We tried to help each other as much as we could by getting ready together or doing our hair together or helping each other with cheers."

Over the last year, Lucero and her other teammates began to seek out other girls in school to become part of their cheer family. "I did a lot of recruiting this past year. I talked to a lot of girls and expressed the benefits to being a cheerleader. We took ownership of the squad. I talked a lot of them into trying it. I told the girls that cheerleading is a sport and it can help you to build physical strength and good flexibility as well. I also said that showing you were a cheerleader in high school and keeping good grades can be a positive on your college applications. You can also make lifelong friends."

Lucero gives a lot of credit to Maxwell's cheerleading coach Debra Arellano, who she says really brought the team together and gave it some direction. "Coach Arellano let us come up with our own cheers. She is really about what is best for our squad and helping us get the most out of our experience. Coach Arellano also brought some new ideas that help us grow as a squad. She is very demanding of us but I think that has pushed this squad to a new level."

Lucero continued, "I started cheering when I was three and have been cheering ever since. Cheering also helped mold me into who I am. I'm very outgoing and have no problem speaking to others. I love my school and have great school spirit and I feel cheering has been a major part of that. People don't understand what an important role sports play in kids' lives. Sports help kids grow and really shape you into who you will be. Without sports and cheerleading especially I wouldn't be the person I am today."

Besides cheering, Lucero also serves as the president of Maxwell's 4-H chapter, where she has coordinated several blood drives within her community and the surrounding areas. "I've been the blood drive coordinator for about four years now. It wasn't until my grandmother needed a blood transfusion that I really got involved and it became a passion for me. We hold blood drives at school, in town and even at the county fair. Being able to speak to people about the importance of giving blood is very gratifying. I've also got a lot of my classmates involved. I enjoy being a part of my community and staying involved as much as I can."

Lucero also plays volleyball for Maxwell, as the team's setter, and says it's her favorite sport. She feels that this year's team has a good chance to make the state tournament. "I love playing volleyball. The setter really controls the game for the team and I embrace that role. I'm also the player on the team that communicates with officials during the game. This year's team, I really feel like we have what it takes to make it to the state tournament. We work together and support each other on and off the court. It's a special group of young ladies and I'm proud to be a part of that."

Standing at just under 5-1, Lucero throws the javelin for her school's track and field team. In spite of being small in stature, Lucero has excelled in an event generally dominated by athletes with a larger frame. "I started throwing the javelin my freshman year and I've always had good upper body strength. Last year I made it to state, taking second at the district meet. At the state event, I threw 96-feet and most people were shocked to see a person of my stature throw the javelin that far. It felt good to prove to people that I belonged and I feel good about my performance. I look forward to going back this year and improving on my performance from a year ago."

Overcoming what life has dealt you can be hard for most people, but Lucero has always taken the high road and tried to make the best out of the situation. Most students might use a life-altering accident like the one Lucero and her family went through in 2010, as a crutch but she does not. She has taken that adversity, learned from it, shared her story and made a difference in others, which is evident in her teammates cheering on the sideline and competing on the court with her.

One thing is for sure. Lucero, who plans to go to college after graduation and enter the medical field, will be touching people's lives for years to come.