

New Mexico Activities Association

Student-Athlete Spotlight



Atkins Faces Life's Challenges Head On

By Tyler Dunkel, NMAA Sports Information Director

A major factor in the development of each individual is the environment in which he/she is raised. For Justice Atkins of West Las Vegas High School, that environment early in life looked as though it might not be the ideal situation until family stepped in and turned her life around.

Atkins and her family lived in Las Cruces, N.M., until she was a second grader. Her parents were having a hard time making ends meet so that reached out to her grandparents, Valerie Villa-Lopez and Salvador Lopez for help. At first they wanted Atkins brother, Sal, to move in with them but they knew they needed to keep them together.

Atkins reflected on that time in her life.

"Growing up, my parents were very troubled. I took care of my little brother a lot and then my grandparents took us in. They have taught me compassion for others and how important it is to help others. I'm very grateful for what they have done for us."

Mr. Lopez explains that taking Justice and her brother into their home was not a difficult decision at all.

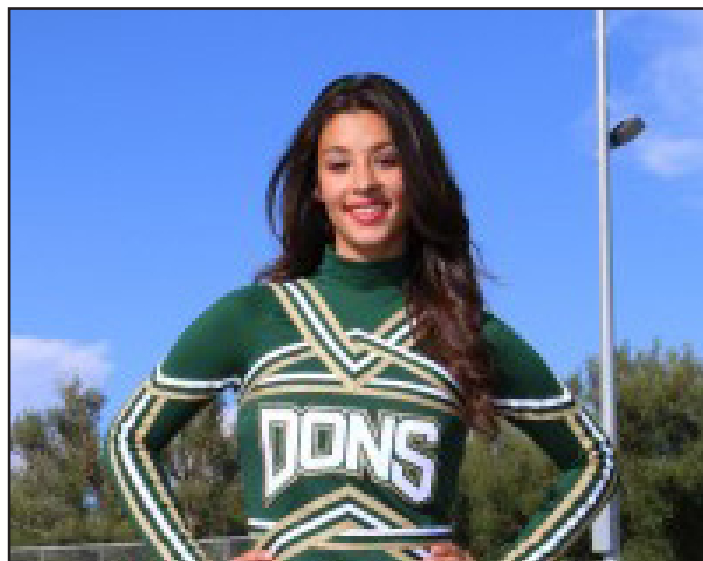
"We never thought twice about taking them in. They had never been apart so we wanted to give them the opportunity for stability. Giving them a chance was the main goal and we give Justice a lot of credit because she has really taken advantage of that. All we could do was try to get them to understand the difference between right and wrong and to take advantage of the opportunities in front of them."

Mrs. Lopez agrees that it was a tough time for the family but it was the right decision for both Justice and Sal.

"It was a rough time in our life when Justice and her brother came to live with us. I had just had a baby four months earlier when we got the call from her mom that they needed help. At first they wanted us to just take her brother but we decided to take them both."

Leaving home at such an early age and moving to a new city was hard at first for Atkins. This story could have taken a totally different path but Atkins didn't let her situation define her; instead she embraced it and has found success.

Atkins quickly got involved in sports and has participated in volleyball, cheerleading, softball, band and 4H/FFA, while carrying a 4.03 GPA.



"I'm involved in a lot of different activities at West Las Vegas. It keeps me busy and focused," Atkins said. "Sports have really helped me with my time management. I know that sounds strange but sports have really made me focus on my priorities and made me watch my time. Going into the medical field, it will be an important skill I will need later down the line."

Mrs. Lopez says that although Atkins is involved in so many activities, her focus and work ethic are amazing for such a young adult.

"Justice's work ethic is second to none. She works harder than anyone I know and that has translated over to sports. When a coach comes to you and says they really need her on the team because of her leadership and work ethic, it is a good feeling. She takes the time to help others so that the team will be successful."

This past spring, Atkins again faced adversity, suffering an injury to her elbow while doing a back handspring. She continued to compete, helping her team to a state championship at the State Spirit competition.

"I hurt my elbow last spring doing a back handspring. I thought the pain would just go away but it didn't. I continued to compete with the injury, helping our cheer team win state and then played the entire softball season."

The injury forced Atkins to sit out the first part of the cheer season this fall and not being able to cheer with her team on the sidelines at football games and other competitions has been hard.

"It is hard right now to be on the sidelines, watching the rest of the cheer team practice and compete. I want to be out there so badly but I know if I do compete I could risk permanent damage to my elbow, so for now I'll just give it time to rest."

Adversity however has never stopped Atkins and she looks at the situation as an opportunity to help her fellow teammates.

"This has given me the opportunity to help some of the younger kids on the team," Atkins said. "But I'm looking forward to being back on the sideline soon."

Atkins also mentioned that this time away has allowed her to really focus on her academics, in hopes of one day attending medical school.

"My academics are the key to my success later down the line. I work really hard at maintaining a good GPA and my studies always come first. My goal is to attend the University of New Mexico and become a doctor. My sister (Victoria) was just recently accepted to the UNM Medical School and she has been a huge influence on me."

Embracing what life has thrown at her is what Atkins has always done and, in the process, it has made her into the young woman who is destined for success.