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McGuire Scholarship Winners Pledge to Work for Community

March 1, 2023

By Paula Katinas (https://thetablet.org/author/p_katinas/)



McGuire Scholarship winners gathered for a ceremony in which they were given jackets. (Photo: Courtesy of St. Francis College)

DOWNTOWN BROOKLYN — Stiven Vasquez Nunez always wanted to go to college, but he felt the odds were stacked against him. For one thing, he couldn't afford it. For another, his immigrant parents, who hail from the Dominican Republic, speak only Spanish and wouldn't be able to guide him through the college application process.

But the odds tipped in his favor. He's a St. Francis College sophomore majoring in criminal justice with an eye toward becoming a criminal defense lawyer. And he's the first to say he couldn't have done it without help.

In his freshman year, Vasquez Nunez secured approximately \$9,000 in financial assistance from the Robert J. McGuire Scholarship program to put toward his tuition.

"I'm really happy to have it. Things would be tough for me otherwise," said Vasquez Nunez, who holds down two part-time jobs on campus to help make ends meet.

The scholarship, which St. Francis College offers to 20-25 students each year, is named after former New York City Police Commissioner Robert J. McGuire. It was established in 2015 with funding from the Fred and Judy Wilpon Foundation.

McGuire served as the NYPD's commissioner from 1978 to 1983. Fred Wilpon is the former owner of the New York Mets. Judy Wilpon, an accomplished equestrian, is active in the Long Island Kennel Club and in programs training therapy dogs. The Wilpons and McGuire are close friends.

While none is a St. Francis graduate (McGuire is an alum of Iona College, and the Wilpons graduated from the University of Michigan), they chose St. Francis to house the scholarship out of respect for the memory of Frank Macchiarola (1941-2012) who served as president of St. Francis from 1996 to 2008 and chancellor from 2008 to 2012.

St. Francis College is winning national recognition for the program. It won the Gold Excellence Award from the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), an organization of higher education professionals.

"This is huge for us," said St. Francis College President Miguel Martinez-Saenz. His school is committed to the scholarship program because "it fills a financial gap that keeps many students from going to college," he said.

"It helps get kids over the finish line," he added. "They graduate, and they go on to do great things in their communities."

The program, which is targeted toward helping students who are the first generation in their families to attend college, is open to incoming freshmen who maintained an 85 or above grade average in high school and whose family income is less than \$125,000 a year.

St. Francis College has awarded McGuire scholarships to 160 students since the program was established eight years ago.

In addition to financial help, the scholarship provides academic support, with each recipient being assigned a coach to work with them one on one. There are also leadership training classes.

The McGuire program is considered so prestigious it has become competitive on campus, Martinez-Saenz said. "Last year, we had 250 kids apply and gave out somewhere between 20 and 25 scholarships," he added.

Vasquez Nunez, 19, who lives in Sunset Park and is a parishioner of St. Michael's Church, is the second person in his family to attend college. His brother Yan, 22, is a graduate of Brooklyn College.

Steven is in the honors program at St. Francis and serves as a student ambassador. He is also a member of the school's mock trial team, which offers him the chance to try out the verbal skills he will need as a lawyer in the courtroom.

Ever busy, he works as a research assistant and a teacher's aide at St. Francis College.

Vasquez Nunez recalled what it felt like two years ago when he was graduating from Brooklyn Collaborative High School in Carroll Gardens during the pandemic and wondering if going to college was a pipe dream.

"I was searching online for scholarships, and I saw St. Francis College. This scholarship came up. I saw it and thought, 'I think I fit the requirements.' But I had so much going on during COVID and other applications to fill out that I left everything to the last minute," he said.

His mother, Maritza, a home health aide, and his father, Jose, a factory worker, who brought their two sons to the U.S. from their native Dominican Republic in 2015, could not help him with the application because of the language barrier.

"I submitted the essay two days before the deadline. I didn't think I would get the scholarship because I have really bad luck when it comes to stuff like this," he admitted.

However, Vasquez Nunez's luck was about to change. He was called for an interview with college officials. The next thing he knew, they were calling his Sunset Park house and asking to see him.

"I got an email from the school saying that they were going to be around my neighborhood, and they wanted to give me a goodie bag. I said, 'Sure.' And then they called me and said, 'We're downstairs outside your house.' I was surprised. ... They gave me a certificate and told me I had won the scholarship," he recalled.

His parents were thrilled. "They always told us, 'You have to get good grades so you can go to college. You have to get good jobs,'" Vasquez explained. "I think that's because they didn't get the chance to go to college."

Both brothers heeded the advice of their parents and focused on education.

"I've always been like an honor student. My brother as well," Vasquez said. "For me, education is something that I always celebrate."

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