When I first met Enrique Flores, I was instantly drawn to his electric personality and his motivation to help others. Seeing firsthand the opportunities for success that Enrique has created through his non-profit organization, East Side Heroes, I became energized by his charisma and joined the Board of Directors. In just five years, East Side Heroes has raised more than $200,000 to provide scholarships to private high schools for its low-income mentees, while also providing leadership development and mentorship. The following is an introduction to two of the latest success stories. Thank you for reading on.

East Side Heroes

by Enrique Flores, founder

When I first met Ana Plascencia as an eighth-grade student, I was truly worried about her. Ana was on the fast-track to end up as a stereotypical statistic, which is the story of too many young Latinas. Ana's peer group dressed the same, talked the same, and thought the same. I feared Ana would soon fall in love with an active gang member, become pregnant, consume drugs and alcohol on a regular basis, lose faith in the value of school, and settle for a minimum-wage job.

When I first met Alma Acosta as an eighth-grade student, I noticed a lonely, introverted girl, who had big dreams for herself. I saw hope in her eyes hope of being the first person in her family to graduate from college in order to help her family rise out of low-income status, help her community, and be the trail-blazer pioneer for her two younger sisters.

When I first met Ana and Alma's parents, they reminded me of my own parents. They had no idea of how to navigate the process of applying to a college prep high school and filling out financial aid forms. But, what they did know, is that they would do whatever it takes to help their children "make it" in life. Immigrant parents like Alma's and Ana's, and mine as well, have a common belief: "The best inheritance we can leave our children is a good education."

For nobody can ever take a college education away; a college degree never decreases in value; and a quality education always gives back to you and others.

This June, both Ana and Alma will be celebrating a family dream achieving a high school diploma. Four years ago, East Side Heroes awarded scholarship aid to both of these young women, at our annual banquet, because we believed what they said. Ana and Alma verbally vowed to keep a promise. Ana and Alma promised themselves and their family that they would give 100 percent each and every day, until they reached all of their goals.

This April, East Side Heroes will celebrate Ana and Alma's fulfillment of that promise. Both Ana and Alma have maintained a 4.2 GPA and have applied to various colleges, such as Santa Clara University and Stanford University.

On April 17, Ana and Alma will reveal which university they will be attending in the fall. Ana's career goal is to become a medical doctor in order
to provide pro-bono services to low-income families throughout impoverished countries. Alma aspires to become a legal attorney in order to help achieve equality and empowerment for all women.

Each year, East Side Heroes’ volunteers labor to raise scholarship funds for other eighth-grade students, who still dare to dream big dreams. East Side Heroes currently has six other students studying at Notre Dame High School, Archbishop Mitty High School, and Bellarmine College Preparatory. Please join us in our vow to support East Side Heroes’ students as they continue relentlessly on their individual quest.

If you would like to learn more about East Side Heroes, please visit www.eastsideheroes.org or contact me at enrique_essj@hotmail.com.

If you would like to help, the seventh annual East Side Heroes Student Achievement Banquet will be Saturday, April 17, 4-6 p.m. at the Roosevelt Community Center, 901 E. Santa Clara St., San Jose, Calif. 95116. Keynote speaker will be Father Greg “G” Boyle, S.J.

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Dave Cortese represents Milpitas, Berryessa and North San Jose on the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors.