

Community Builder

Social Work Student Uses UNH Experience to Make a Difference Back Home

Thursday, May 8, 2014

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Students relax at OMSA, aka "home-sa." l to r: Selena Tavarez, Ashley Gonzalez, and Andres Mejia.

Take a photo of Andres Mejia '14 in the [Office of Multicultural Student Affairs](#) (OMSA) suite in the Memorial Union Building and everyone there wants to be in it.

Mejia, who has been in OMSA almost every day since his first year at UNH, now holds several social justice leadership positions at UNH. His exceptional gifts for listening and dialog led to his being the first social work student to hold a full-year internship at OMSA.

As a first-generation college student, Mejia has traveled long distances not measured by the miles from his home in Dorchester, Mass.

“When I came to Orientation with my mom, it was my first time on campus,” recalls Mejia. “I didn’t know I was supposed to come to school for a visit before picking a school. We’d just looked at the brochure. My mom really liked it, and I did, too. It was Wow! OK, let’s go.”

Mejia got received the financial aid he needed at UNH, but he also chose UNH because it was far enough away from Boston. He sensed that the distance would allow him to reinvent himself.

Still downtown Durham was a puzzle of sorts. As someone used to Boston, his community, and lots of music, Durham was really small and very quiet. “It was kind of shocking,” says Mejia.

But for him even to consider college, Mejia had really counted on the encouragement of his high school guidance counselor and tenth-grade math teacher. “They pushed and pushed me,” says Mejia, who notes that the big message for him growing up was to stay in his community and help out his family. “I would be working at Rite Aid until 11 o’clock and Ms. Bush would show up and ask, ‘What are you doing here? You’re supposed to be home doing your homework.’ As a result, I did cut down my hours a bit. If it wasn’t for them, I would not be here.”

Like many students of color at UNH, Mejia participated in the Connect Program during the summer before his first academic year. As a result, he learned about OMSA and also the Center for Academic Resources. “Connect and OMSA gave me that sense of community. They let me know I would be supported here,” says Mejia.

When he found his major, social work, his academic plan solidified. He also took on two minors, women’s studies and race, culture, and power. It’s the social justice mission of social work that Mejia finds gratifying. And soon, even as a first-year student, he was traveling back to his old high school to do workshops on “College Is for Everyone.”

“My message to those high school freshman, sophomores, juniors, and seniors is just – you can do it,” says Mejia. “I volunteered here at the Admissions Office to see what they’re looking for in an application, so I could go back and let them know.”



ANDRES MEJIA IS PRESENTED THE PINK TRIANGLE AWARD BY SHANNON BROWN-MARTHOUSE AT 22ND ANNUAL PANCAKE BREAKFAST.

Mejia has tremendous energy and he is drawn to leadership roles. Even with the internship, his classes, and several part-time jobs, Mejia serves on the Anti-Racism Team (ART) and the President's Commission on the Status of People of Color. This year, he is co-chair of MOSAICO the Latino/Latina student organization. Additionally, after four years, he is now president of MOS DEF (Men of Strength: Diversity, Education and Family).

"MOS DEF is a closed group for men of color. We meet every Friday," says Mejia. "It's just a place where we can talk about the stereotypes. Black men are supposed to be angry and violent and uneducated. As men of color there's a lot we can't talk about in classrooms. But in this group, we talk about all of that and about stuff men don't usually talk about – love, our dreams, our goals, and family. We're close to each other and we call each other 'brother.' Last year we went to New York City together. This year, we're going to DC. We also have a lot of MOS DEF UNH alumni support. It's pretty cool."

Here at UNH, in OMSA, Mejia has been supported by Sean McGhee, director; Otis Douce, multicultural coordinator; and Ellen Semran, LGBTQA+ coordinator.

This spring, Mejia was awarded a Movers and Shakers award for his collaborative leadership style and a Pink Triangle award for his outstanding contributions to "efforts for equity and visibility" for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, Queer, and Allies (LGBTQA) community on campus.

Semran notes that Mejia received the Pink Triangle award for many reasons, including his advocacy to change the Mr. and Ms. MOSAICO annual event to include a third, gender-neutral title, Mx. MOSAICO.

“He learned about gender neutral language at our Alliance meetings,” says Semran. “And he really embraced the concept and had conversations with the MOSAICO exec board to explain the importance of being inclusive. Andres just makes sure that we don’t work in silos and he has really brought people together across identities.”

Next year, Mejia will be back in the Boston area, working for Teach for America and studying for his master’s degree in urban education.

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