OPPORTUNITY

By Teresa Moore and Liz Murthaugh Gillespie

HORACIO RODRIGUEZ

HEATHER FELIX
IT’S THE GIFT THAT KEEPS ON GIVING.

SCHOLARSHIPS – whether funded by the government, foundations, alumni, families or individuals – open the door to opportunity for many students at UW Bothell. By making the dream of a college education a reality, scholarships can change more than just a single student’s life. They can inspire generations.

‘THEY LOOK UP TO THEIR BIG BROTHER. I WANT TO HELP THEM GET AN EDUCATION, TOO.’

It was a long road from the streets of Yakima to the halls of the state capitol for Horacio Rodriguez.

The UW Bothell sophomore took his first trip to visit with legislators last year. Today, he’s serving as the voice of students among lawmakers in his second year as a student government leader. And while the distance from his hometown to Bothell and Olympia may seem relatively short as the crow flies, his journey wasn’t easy.

Horacio’s father came to the United States from Mexico at the age of 12. His mother was born in Yakima. The couple met in middle school and had Horacio when they were just teenagers.

Finances were tight, and Horacio lived with his grandparents for a while. Slowly, his determined parents made a life for their family, which grew to also include three daughters. But they lived under immense stress in a rough part of town.
"In middle school, I began to realize what pressure they were under. I remember not having as much as other kids, but I had good values," Horacio recalls. "My father taught me a lot, and he inspired me. I hope to be half the man he is."

When Horacio started running around with gangs and skipping school, his parents sat him down for a life-altering conversation. His mother said: "What will I tell your little sisters when they're crying at your funeral?"

That did it.

The family moved to nearby Selah. Horacio buckled down and got more involved in school, clubs and sports. He took part-time jobs at a warehouse and a fast food restaurant. His mom signed him up for a scholarship program that promised to cover tuition if he made good grades and kept out of trouble.

When a UW Bothell recruiter came to his high school – on a day when Horacio was proudly wearing a purple and gold Washington sweater – the dream of attending a small public college with the prestige of the UW brand began to take root. His scholarship made that dream come true.

Now, the business major is setting his sights on law school – and on being a role model for his fellow UW Bothell students as well as his sisters.

"My sisters look up to their big brother. I want to help them get an education," says Horacio, who is also a member of Rotaract, a service club that’s an offshoot of Rotary.

He says he plans to return to Selah to help his community and his family as an attorney. "Opportunity is everything. I want to give back to others."

"I WANTED TO BE THE ONE WHO WENT TO COLLEGE."

When she was in kindergarten, Heather Felix drew a girl in a graduation cap and gown for the "What do you want to be when you grow up?" wall at her school and declared, "I want to go to college!"

The teacher cautioned Heather that a lot of people in their community didn't do that. That just made her want to go even more. Her parents hadn't gone to college, and most kids she grew up with in the Appalachian Mountains went to work on farms or in trades like construction or welding.

None of that mattered to Heather. "Sometimes it seemed like a childhood fantasy – like it might never happen. But no matter what anybody said, I wanted to be the one who went to college," Heather says.

She kept her grades up in high school, set her sights on the Seattle area after spending a few summers with a family friend in Bothell, then left Pennsylvania behind – proud that her dream of going to college was finally coming true.

She was drawn to UW Bothell's focus on interdisciplinary studies and extracurricular experiences like community volunteerism.

"I have the freedom to explore things that build me as a person, and it's recognized," said Heather, who has excelled as a resident advisor and leader of the student activism group ACT (Achieving Community Transformation).

As an out-of-state student, Heather has relied on financial aid and scholarships – including one from the UW Bothell Alumni Student Support Endowed Fund. She also has worked two or three jobs at a time to make ends meet.

A job as a student assistant at the campus career center helped her zero in on occupational therapy as a profession that blends her interests in health, human rights and working with people with disabilities.

She wants more people like her younger brother, who’s on the autism spectrum, to gain confidence in what they can do rather than letting others define them by what they can’t do.

As she gears up to graduate with dual degrees in society, ethics and human behavior and health studies, Heather hopes that someday she can not only help people live better lives, but to make occupational therapy available to more people who can benefit from it.