

# DEFINING A LEGACY: FIRST GENERATION FUENTES

Northern Virginia Community College student Henry Fuentes unearths his fullest potential while working to become the first person in his family to earn a college degree.

By Kali Woods

**D**ID YOU KNOW THAT MORE THAN 50 PERCENT OF ALL undergraduates are classified as “first generation” students, according to the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA)? “First generation,” a term popularized in the early 2000s, describes students who are the first in their families to attend college. Venturing into new territory will undoubtedly come with barriers along the way, but students like Henry Fuentes say they are welcoming the challenge with open arms.

ACCT was first introduced to Fuentes during a staff retreat visit to the Loudoun County campus of Northern Virginia Community College, commonly referred to as NOVA. Fuentes, the current Student Government Association (SGA) president, took part in a panel featuring five other students at different stages of their academic journeys. In an intimate table mixer with a group of ACCT staff members, Fuentes shared how his ascension to the college’s highest seat of student leadership began with a heavy heart of apprehension and uncertainty.

As a 17-year-old high school senior in Loudoun County, Fuentes wasn’t sure if college was ever a realistic option for him. As his senior year quickly wound down, it seemed as though most of his classmates were already making decisions about what universities they were planning to attend in the fall. But despite all the buzz about admissions, Fuentes couldn’t understand what all the commotion was about. “I didn’t even know why people considered college to be so important. My friends were like, ‘Oh I got into this school!’ or ‘I got into that school!’, and I was like...so what?” he recalled.

In the Fuentes family, college was not the natural segue into adulthood. Entering the workforce was seen as the true rite of passage for a teenage boy. Fuentes, the son of two immigrant parents, explained that higher education was nowhere nearly as accessible for his mother and father as it is for him today.

“My dad actually never even went to high school. He grew up in a very poor environment in his home country. And my mom [...] was actually very gifted. She had the opportunity to go to one of the best schools in her country, but unfortunately could not do it because of funds,” Fuentes said.

While his parents may have missed out on the memories of picking out classes for their first semester or hanging out in the student union, Fuentes made it clear that their labor was not in vain. After years of working in the restaurant industry, Fuentes’s mom and dad met and fell in love at the very restaurant they now own together, La Chocita Grill. The local eatery that serves up South and Central American fare in Leesburg, Virginia, is now cemented in the Fuentes family legacy. But even with all the restaurant’s successes, Henry’s parents were adamant about him not following in their footsteps.

“They implored me to go to college. My father, especially, told me [that] the way that he works is rough. I mean, the restaurant business is not kind... It’s heavy hours. You burn yourself. You’re cooking; you’re sweating,” he said.

While Fuentes’s father is proud of the legacy he and his wife have been able to create without college degrees, he knew higher education could open up doors for his son that they would never be able to through.

“He told me that he [works] because he has to... He’s got bills to pay. He said that it’s no life for me [...] he would much rather have me go into school, get myself a comfortable job, [and] not have to worry about hard labor for the rest of my life,” Fuentes recalled.

Although a little anxious, Fuentes was always intrigued by the idea of community college. However, his high school classmates with plans to attend four-year universities were not always the most supportive. They often mocked community college, calling two-year institutions “high school 2.0.” Nonetheless, after weighing his options, Fuentes heeded the words of his parents and made the decision to ignore the

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stigma and experience NOVA for himself. His excitement began to grow as the fall semester neared. But it didn’t last long, as thoughts of doubt began to swirl in his head.

“I had absolutely no idea what I was doing, to the point where I thought that I was going to have so much trouble that I considered not even going to college. It was really rough for me,” he remembered.

Fuentes struggled with enrollment, feeling lost as he tried to understand what felt like a foreign language — the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid). His frustrations began to consume him, but with the assistance of a friendly staff member named Kevin who worked in the student services department on NOVA’s Loudoun campus, Fuentes was able to get everything situated before the start of the semester. In fact, his interaction with Kevin was so impactful that Fuentes later went on to become a student services ambassador to assist other first-year students in navigating the enrollment process.

Fuentes quickly learned the ropes at NOVA, excelling in his classes, joining different clubs, and taking on multiple student leadership positions. While pursuing his associate degree in business administration, he was tapped to become a senator for the college’s student government association. And after a semester of serving, he was emboldened by peers and staff to run for SGA president.

Henry will serve his first full year as president during his final year at the college. He said he recognizes the weight of the position he holds. This semester, he will be working to enhance the college’s food pantry so that students in need have access to reliable resources. Additionally, he will meet with the provost and administrators on a regular basis to advocate for student interests and give students an opportunity to make real change on their campus.

Fuentes said his parents could not be any prouder of all that he’s been able to achieve in such a short amount of time at NOVA. Like many first-generation students, he admitted that sometimes the

pressure of becoming the family’s first college success story can be a heavy load to bear. But ultimately, that pressure produces passion. “I’m like, ‘I’ve got to do better. I’ve got to be bigger.’ At some points, I think that that’s unhealthy, but at other points, it’s drive. It’s motivation,” he said.

Once he obtains his associate degree, Fuentes plans to transfer to the highly selective “public Ivy” University of Virginia and work toward a bachelor’s degree in quantitative finance. Fuentes’ goal is to become an investment banker, and he plans to use his business acumen to invest in and expand the family business.

Enrolling at Northern Virginia Community College has proven to be one of the best decisions Fuentes could have made. He said the college has laid the foundation for a bigger and brighter future, while maturing him in ways he never could have imagined.

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