



Dave Heineman  
Governor

## STATE OF NEBRASKA

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### TWO NEBRASKA STUDENTS NAMED NATIONAL HISPANIC SCHOLAR

LINCOLN – The National Hispanic Recognition Program (NHRP) has bestowed two Nebraskan high school graduates with the title of National Hispanic Scholar making them two of 5,000 Latino students nationwide to receive this honor.

To qualify, the students had to have taken the Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test (PSAT/NMSQT) in October of their junior year of high school, be at least one-quarter Hispanic/Latino, be an American citizen or permanent resident, achieve the minimum required PSAT/NMSQT cutoff score and have a grade point average (GPA) of 3.0 or higher on a 4.0 scale. The PSAT/NMSQT is a standardized test administered by the College Board that provides firsthand practice for the SAT Reasoning Test by measuring critical reading skills, writing skills and mathematical problem-solving skills.

#### **Matthew Cervantes**

Matthew Cervantes, 18, is from Papillion and a recent graduate of Creighton Preparatory Academy in Omaha, Ne. He graduated with a 4.0 GPA and graduated in the top 5 percent of his class.

“I wasn’t aware that there was a Hispanic Scholar recognition, I was excited,” said Cervantes upon learning of his Hispanic Scholar status. “I do what I do not for recognition or awards I do it because I was taught it was right thing to do. I had a rigorous course schedule with a lot of AP classes. My parents always encouraged me to do my best and so I always try to do my very best and I study a lot with my younger brother. I do my homework right away every night.”

His school achievements include the Holy Cross Scholar Award and being a member of the Campus Ministry Advisory Board, Prep Accepts, a diversity promotional student group, and Green Circle where they teach acceptance of fellow students. He says finding the right balance with family, faith and friends are important.



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“Focus and dedicate your time to grades and remember that if you put everything into what you do that success is not far behind. I encourage everyone to find a balance on academic rigor and balance other aspects in life,” he said.

Cervantes’s fraternal family can trace their roots to Mexico and his maternal family is originally from India.

“I’m pretty proud of my heritage and where I come from; I am Hispanic and Indian. In our household and in my extended family there’s a difference of cultures and ideas and it’s nice. I meet different people everyday and I feel lucky my background is something interesting but does not define me,” he said.

He has advice for Latino students who have experienced negativity based on their ethnicity and background.

“Some people get hung up on culture and race, I’ve been to places where stereotypes of Hispanics can be rough,” said Cervantes. “Your culture is something to be proud of, it’s good to meet as many different people as you can and meet people with an open mind. I’d tell anyone who felt that because of something that made them different; race, religion, etc. that if they’re true to themselves and try their best they shall never feel any reason to be afraid to succeed in life.”

Cervantes is attending the University of Notre Dame in Notre Dame, Indiana. He plans to study biology and attend medical school.

### **Itahi Sanchez**

Itahi Sanchez, 17, just recently graduated from Lincoln High School in Lincoln, Ne. among the top percentile of her class. She also earned the additional title of National Merit Finalist from the National Merit Scholarship Corporation.

“I feel accomplished and I’m just proud of my achievement,” said Sanchez. “I’m excited because I know this will get me a chance of a scholarship at the University of Nebraska - Lincoln, the Chancellor’s Scholarship, that’s tuition plus \$2,000...to get that you have to be a finalist in the National Merit Scholarship.”

At the University of Nebraska – Lincoln (UNL), Sanchez would like to study biochemistry, and plans to attend graduate school. She became interested in biochemical research while studying fungi and chemicals while participating in EnvironMentors at UNL, an environment-based



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mentoring program that encourages underserved youth to explore an environmental education and career. Sanchez wants to continue studying fungi for medical research purposes.

Sanchez's parents are originally from Oaxaca, Mexico and settled in Lincoln in 1990. The youngest of seven children, Sanchez and her family are Mixtec, meaning they are of an indigenous Mesoamerican people from certain states of Mexico. Their lineage includes Spanish and African ancestry.

"Be proud of your history," advises Sanchez to fellow Latino students. "Research what your ancestors did, it can be very inspiring. I have a great-grandparent who led a rebellion in Oaxaca; there was a valley that had been under the rule of conquistadors and (the Mixtecos) led a rebellion and got the valley back for their own people; that's inspiring."

While in school, she was an officer in the Astronomy Club, a member of the National Honor Society, an editor for her school newspaper all four years of high school, participated in UNL's Upward Bound and was on the Slam Poetry Team. On weekends, she volunteered at the Cat House.

Looking back, Sanchez admits her achievements were difficult to attain but was worth the hard work and sacrifice.

"I have a hard time dealing with stress so I had to keep getting myself over the feeling that I can't do it all, I had to set realistic limits. Learning is what motivates me most, not just the GPA. I do try to focus, I find a good quiet place and get rid of distractions like texting and Facebook," she said.

Now a graduate, Sanchez has advice for underclassmen: "Focus on your strengths and make the most of it, even if your strength isn't test-taking, work on what you are good at...find your niche, and it will bring out the best in you."

Although being named a National Hispanic Scholar does not provide a financial reward, the title is prestigious and the list of Hispanic Scholars is sent to colleges and universities nationwide.

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*Note: Photos Available*