

Hempstead High valedictorian following in siblings' footsteps

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When Caleb Cañas walks onto the stage at Hempstead High School's graduation on June 26, he will join a select group of overachieving siblings.



Photo credit: Newsday/Alejandra_Villa | Caleb Canas, a senior and the 2010 Hempstead High School valedictorian with photos of his siblings who were also excellent students at Hempstead High. (June 15, 2010)

Great Grad: [Caleb Cañas](#)

When Caleb Cañas walks onto the stage at Hempstead High School's graduation on Saturday, he will join a select group of overachieving siblings.

First came Juan, the 2004 valedictorian, a [Columbia University](#) graduate and, now 24, a medical student at Drexel University. Erika, now 20, was ranked third in the class of 2007 and studies architecture at Columbia University. Now it's the turn for "the little one," as their mother calls Caleb, the youngest of three. Caleb, 18, an earnest young man with a disarming smile, has earned the title of valedictorian this year and is bound for [Harvard University](#) this fall on a full scholarship.

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Only one other pair of siblings has shared the title of valedictorian in the past decade, a school official said. Even with his stellar record - a string of AP classes, perfect scores on several Regents exams - Caleb insists that his accomplishments not be characterized as singular. "It's not that out of the norm," he said. At the graduation ceremony, set for 1 p.m. in the high school auditorium, Caleb will deliver a speech aiming to inspire about 200 classmates to pursue their dreams, as he and his siblings have tried to do. "I did it. So can you. It can happen," he said in an interview.

'Foundation has to be in the home'

In the Cañas-Flores family, achievement begins at home.

Miriam Flores, a single mother since she and her husband divorced a decade ago, said education was the top priority. At the entrance to their one-bedroom apartment in Hempstead, a sort of shrine to the kids' academic success stands as a reminder: Caleb's plaque from seventh grade, when his classmates voted him "hero," Juan's valedictorian trophy, and Erika's eighth-grade salutatorian trophy.

"She likes to display our trophies," said Caleb, pointing to his brother and sister's "val/sal" awards. "It's too long to say valedictorian/salutatorian, so we just keep it simple."

Flores, a native of [El Salvador](#), gave up her own pursuit of a college degree in psychology in 1984, when she fled her homeland amid a raging civil war.

She settled in Hempstead, married and started a family. After the divorce, Flores supported her kids through a cashier's job at [Costco](#) in [Westbury](#) and with domestic work on the side. She became a U.S. citizen about four years ago, she said. Because she did not want her children distracted by the lure of a little extra cash or overwhelmed by too many responsibilities, she did not allow them to work.

"I've always wanted them to succeed and be a good example for Hispanics," Flores said in Spanish. "The foundation has to be in the home, and children have to have a desire to be someone different."

"Her concerns were always to make sure that they had enough time to take care of their education," said guidance counselor [Michael Higgins](#), who worked with the three siblings over nearly a decade. "It's ingrained in them that they were going to be achievers" - an attitude each carried over to their outside activities: track for Juan, band for Erika and trombone for Caleb.

"I saw her efforts and I didn't want them to go in vain," Caleb said of his mother. "I wanted to do something to give back to my mother for what she's given us."

Plans to give back to community

At [Harvard](#), the cost of Caleb's education will be covered by the Gates Millennium Scholar program. The scholarship, administered by the not-for-profit United Negro College Fund, is awarded to minority students with significant financial need who demonstrate academic ability and leadership qualities.

Although he plans to major in biochemistry in college, Caleb says he ultimately wants to become an attorney. "As a lawyer, you have a voice, you can be an advocate within your community," he said.

"Finding a lucrative career has never been his intent," [Higgins](#) said. "What he wants to do is study law and come back and work in a community like this. And if he says he's going to do it, I'm telling you, that's what's going to happen."