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Ricardo Garcia is living proof that opportunity is alive and well and attainable with hard work. Of course, it helps when events occur that give an extra push in the right direction. Such was the case when this Venezuela native's father won a drawing at work for his son to be educated via a free scholarship in one of four colleges in America.

"My Dad worked for the government for 30 years and was at a function before he retired where names were drawn from a hat," Garcia remembers. "He won the first prize, which was a free college education in America. I couldn't believe my luck when he gave it to me."

Garcia now owns and manages the Merlin Muffler and Brake franchise in Frisco, but it did not come without persistence and overcoming obstacles that would have sent a lesser man back home to his family.

His initial trip to the U.S. was heartbreaking to say the least. After an eight-hour flight from Caracas (Garcia's home town) to Los Angeles, he remembers his briefcase was stolen right after he and his wife landed at the airport. The case containing \$13,000 and all his important papers and identification cards were forever lost. That was his first taste of America.

"My wife was my fiancé at the time and we had to get married within two weeks so she could come with me to America," Garcia said. "It was the worst wedding I have ever been to, so rushed, you know? And then to have that first experience here, she was really devastated."

It was 1980. With absolute determination, Garcia completed several college courses in record time, with accolades. His English as a Second Language school was supposed to take one year but Garcia abbreviated it to just six months, eliminating the most obvious obstacle. Then came numerous college degrees from his chosen Northrop University in Inglewood, California.

While attending engineering school in his country, Garcia would work on motorcycles and cars for extra income and knew he would continue his childhood love of engine repair and maintenance in some fashion once in America.

Framed behind the counter of Garcia's shop just above the cash register hang 15 certificates documenting his accomplishments. These include degrees of Associate of Arts (cum laude) in Aerospace Technology, Associate of Applied Science (cum laude) in Aerospace Engineering Technology, Bachelor of Science (cum laude) in Aerospace Engineering Technology, Master of Business Administration in Management, Master of Science in Technology Management, Certificate of graduation in airframe and power plant maintenance with FAA license, as well as a National Dean's List plaque for 1984-1985, Tau Alpha Pi National Honor society and a Who's Who Among Students in American Universities and Colleges certificate.

Garcia remembers working full time on airplanes and helicopters while going to school full time, once again, completing his education much quicker than most.

"I remember taking one master's exam in half the time allotted so I could run to a different building to be able to complete a different master's exam on several occasions," he said. "That was tough. It didn't happen all the time, but several times it did. Whew!"

For the next 14 years Garcia worked his way up in the jet engine over-hauler field in Los Angeles before getting laid off and moving to Texas. He found similar work, but this time in a senior management role, for a private employer at the Addison Airport.

After Garcia was laid off a second time he decided he needed to go into business for himself. Blessed with bilingual abilities



Ricardo Garcia

photo by Chris Johnson

merlin's ricardo garcia

by natalie medigovich

and armed with a stack of diplomas, certificates and awards as proof of his education, Garcia did homework of his own and decided to purchase and manage one of the Chicago-based Merlin Muffler and Brake shops. His decision was cemented when he discovered he qualified for the franchise's Two Language Program granting him a \$10,000 discount because he was bilingual.

Now, Garcia's store on Preston Vineyard Drive and Preston Road has been opened for two years and is doing well. His congeniality and gentle nature brings customers back and reminds them to tell friends about Merlin's.

However, Ricardo's interests go beyond working underneath our cars. Bright Elementary school's administrators heard about his accomplishments and asked Garcia to be a motivational speaker to show kids that, like him, they can do anything if they set their mind to it and work hard for their dream.

Five years ago Garcia became an American citizen. A large American flag is proudly displayed in Merlin's window.

"I told my Mother I can't be both Venezuelan and American, and that my life is here now," Garcia remembered, noting that he has been in America for half of his life. "My wife and I were building a house back in Venezuela in the mid-1980s with every intention of returning home. I had my sister sell it for us. I gotta tell you, as immigrants, we learn to love this country more than some of the natives do," he said smiling.

"I tell everyone my guardian angel is looking out for me," Garcia reflects. "I know I am very, very lucky."

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