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'MEATBALL?'

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A BRIGHT BEGINNING

Grace Place helps teen achieve
college dream **PAGE 4B**

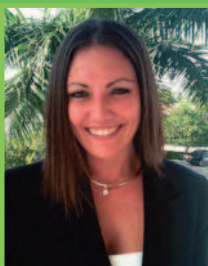
LUKE FRANKE/STAFF

Angie Zavala, 18, a graduate of Lorenzo Walker High School, prepares to head to New York City to attend the Fashion Institute of Technology on Wednesday, Aug. 16, 2017, in Golden Gate.

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PHOTOS BY LUKE FRANKE/NAPLES DAILY NEWS

Angie Zavala, 18, center, a graduate of Lorenzo Walker High School, packs some of her belongings with friends Mia Bernardez, 8, and Mercy Garcia, 17, as well as Mia's sister Mirna, not shown, at her home in Golden Gate on Wednesday. Zavala was preparing to attend the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Grace Place helps Golden Gate teen achieve college dream

ALENA MASCHKE

ALENA.MASCHKE@NAPLESNEWS.COM; 239-263-4722

Angie Zavala and her mother began visiting Grace Place when Angie was a toddler, participating in the organization's Bright Beginnings program together.

On Thursday, Zavala and her mother were getting ready for the 20-hour drive to New York City, where she will begin her freshman year at the Fashion Institute of Technology.

Set in the middle of the 2-mile-by-2-mile square that makes up Golden Gate, nonprofit organization Grace Place seeks to meet the needs of a unique community.

With almost 30,000 residents, Golden Gate is by far the most densely populated community in Collier County, according to the 2015 American Community Survey. For comparison, only about 20,000 people are estimated to live in Naples, which is four times the size of Golden Gate.

The community's population consists mostly of working-class immigrants from Mexico and Central and South America.

"They really are the backbone of Naples," said Ashlea Heck, director of marketing and development at Grace Place.

Almost a third of these residents are under 18, making Golden Gate the community with the most children in the county.

For the children, Grace Place provides an age-appropriate environment to play and learn. For parents, the Bright Beginnings program offers an opportunity to learn more about educational games, improve their English skills and receive support in navigating institutions.

"It's great that in a community like this, we have this type of organization," said Angie Zavala's father, Freddy Zavala, 49. "We had no idea how to get her into college. At Grace Place they explained everything to her, taught her everything: how to apply, how to make the necessary contacts to get assistance."

A third of Golden Gate's adult residents have not completed high school. West of Santa Barbara Boulevard, that number drops sharply to about 14 percent, highlighting one of many differences between Golden Gate and the communities that surround it.

Low levels of formal education can make it hard for parents to prepare their children for the expectations they face in school, Heck said. In its "cradle-to-career"



Angie Zavala, 18, and her father, Freddy, at their home Wednesday.

programs, Grace Place aims to provide both children and parents the tools to succeed in a formal educational environment.

"They're moving up together, which is really wonderful," Heck said.

While in high school, Angie Zavala participated in Grace Place's AP Leadership program, aimed at preventing students from dropping out by providing services such as college preparation and mentoring.

Throughout her senior year, she worked two jobs, as a part-time teaching assistant at Grace Place and as a retail

associate at TJ Maxx.

"A lot of our students are expected to contribute to the household income," Heck said.

Between taking college classes, her participation on the swim team and her work at Grace Place, Angie Zavala had a jam-packed schedule.

"I don't know how I managed it," she said, laughing.

Golden Gate boasts the highest labor force participation in Collier County; over 75 percent of residents over 16 are working.

Still, income levels are low. Almost a

third of household incomes in Golden Gate register below the federal poverty line for a family of four. For students who aspire to go to college, tuition can seem like an insurmountable barrier.

"She has big dreams, and sometimes they worry me," Freddy Zavala said. "We work hard in construction and painting houses ... to survive."

With the help of the Grace Place staff, his daughter has applied for student loans to finance her tuition and living expenses.

For many students, their parents' status can limit access to federal and private loans. Half of Golden Gate residents are foreign-born. A third are not U.S. citizens but are green card or visa holders and undocumented immigrants.

"It's difficult to find someone to co-sign, especially the amount I want to ask for," said Angie Zavala, who is facing the looming tuition and living expenses in New York City.

"That's one of the huge worries I'm dealing with right now, not stressing, but dealing with," she said, laughing.

Despite her financial worries, she is excited about her college experience. For her family it will be a challenging transition.

"I'm a huge resource at home," said Angie Zavala, who often helps translate important documents for her parents or drives them to appointments.

Seventy percent of Golden Gate residents speak English as their second language. For many, like Angie Zavala's family, Spanish is the dominant language spoken at home.

"It's a very nice, quiet community. There's lots of Hispanics here," Freddy Zavala said. "It's a good thing and a bad thing. It's a good thing because it helps you socialize, but you don't have the opportunity to practice English. And that's a barrier."

Visiting her parents' native country, Honduras, was Angie Zavala's inspiration to go into fashion. On one of her childhood visits, her grandmother taught her how to sew.

Her siblings would tease the girl for acting like a tourist when she stared at the vendors weaving traditional fabrics on the side of the street.

"It's just cool to see how from nothing, this beautiful, beautiful garment, something you couldn't find anywhere else," she said.

For now, Angie Zavala aspires to become a buyer for a big fashion retailer and hopes to have her own store one day. But eventually she's hoping to give back by starting an educational foundation.

"Maybe back in Naples, where kids like me — who maybe never had the opportunity to think about college — can have that opportunity," Angie Zavala said. "In Golden Gate especially, the resources are still very limited."