Angel 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.

A BRIGHT BEGINNING
Grace Place helps teen achieve college dream PAGE 4B
Grace Place helps Golden Gate teen achieve college dream

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

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

Angie Zavala, 18, 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.

“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, her 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 cosign, especially the amount I want to ask for,” said Zavala, who is facing 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 going to have 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 Hispanic 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 told 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.

“At Grace Place they explained everything to her, taught her everything: how to apply, how to make the necessary contacts to get assistance,” said Angie Zavala’s father, Freddy Zavala.

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” 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, with 75 percent of residents over 16 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.

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“It’s difficult to find someone to cosign, especially the amount I want to ask for.”

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

“Maybe back in Naples, where kids like me—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.”

COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Grace Place helps Golden Gate teen achieve college dream

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