

CLIMBING THE IVY LEAGUE LADDER

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By Erika Wurst-Staff Writer



Catalina Saenz stared admiringly at her 16-year-old son Friday as he sipped a Frappuccino outside Starbucks in Aurora. It was to be one of the last times she would see him for more than a month, and while her tears were of sadness, they were also of pride.

Roberto Saenz, who will be a senior at East Aurora High School in the fall, will be at Princeton University until July 17 as he and several hundred other top-achievers from across the country spend their summer as part of the Junior Statesman Summer Scholar Program.

While their friends frolic in the summer sun, these students will spend their days in the classroom, learning about politics, government and leadership as part of the monthlong program.

"I'm going to miss a lot (in Aurora)," Roberto "Tito" Saenz said. "But I will gain so much more."

From meeting with ambassadors from the United Nations, to participating in nightly debates, Saenz will spend the days indoors, and he couldn't be more excited.

"I can't believe it," the curly-haired teen said about his dream coming true. "I can't sleep at all."

It started with a love of history, an application in the mail and a dream -- a dream that cost \$5,000. And while Saenz said the endeavour once seemed impossible, with the help of the community and East Aurora School District spokesman and mentor Clayton Muhammad, the teen snagged enough cash to cover the costs.

Donations from the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, the Boys II Men Fraternity, and other local businesses filtered in, and at 6:40 a.m. today, Saenz boarded his plane for a stay at one of the nation's elite universities.

"Ivy League schools just seemed so far (from reach)," Saenz said. "I thought, why bother. But now it's possible; I'm going there. I'm hoping this will be my back door in."

Saenz actually doesn't need any back doors to sneak through. His dedication to education and his hard work throughout his years in East Aurora are indication that he is certainly worthy of Ivy League status.

As vice president of the Junior Class Council, the thespian club and Boys II Men, a local youth initiative dedicated to breaking stereotypes, Saenz also finds time to maintain a 3.8 GPA and a schedule full of honors classes. He was a 2007 Homecoming prince, a NJROTC cadet, first chair in the Honors Jazz Band, and works part time at the Chicago Premium Outlets Mall.

"I've always expected my children to go to college and get a good education for their future," said Catalina Saenz. "But at 16 to be going to Princeton ..." "I truly admire you, Robert," she said, on the verge of tears, staring at the grown-up teen in front of her.

"He went for the gold," the proud mother said, "and hopefully he'll come back with a treasure."

A treasure of knowledge he hopes to one day share with his community.

"If the chance (to do something great) happens, try and grab it," the teenager said, remembering the day he received information about the Junior Statesman Summer Program. "Nothing bad is going to happen if you just try to do it."