

# TDHS student Harvard-bound

By Neita Cecil  
Columbia Gorge News

ONLY 3.4 PERCENT OF applicants got accepted to Harvard this year, the most competitive year in the university's history. And Yahir Santillan-Guzman of The Dalles High School is still in shock that he's one of them.

Santillan-Guzman is not only the first male Latino student to be named valedictorian of The Dalles High School, he's the first The Dalles student in nearly 40 years to receive what is one of the most coveted college acceptances in the world.

He wore Harvard's color, crimson, on April 6, Harvard's decision day — "Just a little manifestation technique," he said.

Decisions would be posted online at 4 p.m. He felt hopeful enough to set up a camera on the table to record the moment, but was also dubious enough that his mom had to convince him to just click on the link to learn his fate.

What happened next was Santillan-Guzman saw "Congratulations!" on the screen, jumped up and hit the table, knocked the phone to the floor, and only recorded video of the ceiling and the sound of him and his mom screaming.

His dad Jose, meanwhile, was on a long drive home from work near Vancouver. He'd asked them to wait but they just couldn't. Yahir thought it would be a "No," and he just wanted to get it over with. "Hindsight is 20/20," Yahir said.

Jose described his endless return home by saying his car "felt like a turtle."

He'd pulled over for some water because "anxiousness had dried me out" when he got a text from his 14-year-old daughter, Yamari: "Dad, Yahir got into Harvard."

"I felt my body fade away, and my eyes filled with tears," said Jose, who had dropped out of high school to work in the fields. His long drive home was "two hours of spilt tears."



Yahir Santillan-Guzman is The Dalles High School's first male Latino student to be valedictorian, and the first graduate in 37 years to be accepted to Harvard University.

He finally got home and wordlessly hugged his son in a long embrace, then told him he loved him. "To say I'm proud of my son right now would be an error, because I've always been proud of him. Harvard? A dream come true."

For Yahir, the news felt unreal. He thought, "Is this the right Harvard? Did I apply to a Harvard in Iowa or something? It's just crazy. Very unexpected."

He couldn't sleep that night. "It was just kind of running in my head: Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa."

He's still in shock that only 1,968 students worldwide got the acceptance notice. "For me to hold one of those acceptances was like, whoa."

That night he'd told three school staff he'd been accepted. The news spread like wildfire. The last time this had happened was 1984, when Bridget Bailey was accepted to Harvard. Santillan-Guzman was

also accepted to Fordham, Northeastern, USC, and Boston College, all top schools. He was weighing USC, but when Harvard's "very, very, very generous" financial package came in, it sealed the deal.

His friends are proud of him, and are wowed that they actually know someone heading to Harvard. He's looking forward to "dropping the H-bomb," the term for telling someone you attend Harvard.

"It is sort of a sense of pride," Santillan-Guzman said. He said he's going to Harvard representing his family locally, his family in the state of Durango in Mexico, his school, the local Latino community, and the wider community of The Dalles.

Born in Hood River, he moved to The Dalles when he was young. He went to OCDC (Oregon Child Development Coalition), the program for children of migrant and



A screenshot of the acceptance notice Yahir Santillan-Guzman received from Harvard. Bill Noonan, Santillan-Guzman's ASPIRE mentor, recounted what a friend of his once told him regarding what Harvard is looking for in an applicant: "You've got to climb Mt. Everest backwards in a wheelchair, and get your face on Time Magazine, but don't mention it to anybody. They don't want anybody who is full of themselves."

seasonal farmworkers, and then went to Chenoweth Elementary.

A few days after his acceptance, Impostor Syndrome set in. He thinks of Harvard students as "these amazing, bright, intelligent kids that are doing research on cancer, and great things, right? And I was like, 'Am I going to fit in?'"

Then he got on a Zoom call with five other Harvard-bound Oregon students, "and that's when I realized, these are just 18-year-olds like me, they're anxious just as well. They might be smarter, they might have one other position I don't have, but I think we're all the same sort of caliber."

Even so, he's nervous about the rigor of his future classload. "I don't even consider myself one of the most intelligent ones at this high school, so being surrounded by a bunch of kids who are much more — for the lack of a better word, more

intelligent than me, yeah, it's a bit nerve wracking."

But, "I'm OK with it. I'm up for the challenge, it will be good personal development."

He's also looking forward to experiencing the famous Nor'easter winter storms.

He was warned by his cousin, who is attending Duke, that he will be entering the world of old money. "He told me be mentally prepared to see the amount of wealth some of the kids have here."

Santillan-Guzman is unfazed. "I'm excited to see the wealth disparities."

Santillan-Guzman grew up frugally, and it taught him financial literacy early on. In fact, that's what he wrote about in his Harvard application essay.

Learning to pinch pennies gave him a deep interest in finances. When he became senior class treasurer, he was disappointed that it didn't involve the actual handling of money.

His favorite subject is math, and that, combined with his interest in finances, led him to pick economics for a major. He wants to minor in engineering, with a goal of helping a major global company combat climate change by going carbon neutral. He wants to either help make supply chains more efficient or help develop new technologies to reduce waste.

Santillan-Guzman, who is in the Talented and Gifted program, said, "I'm a very attentive student during class. My brain's kind of like a sponge, so usually just by paying attention in class, I'm able to remember, so I don't think I've had to do as much studying as other students have. But for an AP test I will study just to refresh the entire course."

Advanced Placement, or AP, classes are college level courses. Santillan-Guzman has taken six AP classes, and done seven AP tests. He just took the AP Spanish test, without taking the class, and got the highest possible score, a 5, on it. "It was really easy, I mean, I'd hope it was easy, being Hispanic."

He got 5's on two other

AP tests last year also. He's shooting for another 5 in AP European History this year. If he gets that, he'll graduate as an AP Scholar with Distinction, the highest level.

Santillan-Guzman was encouraged to apply to Harvard by his ASPIRE mentor, Bill Noonan, who himself attended Harvard for graduate school. ASPIRE mentors help juniors and seniors access education and training beyond high school.

Noonan has been a mentor for six years, and has only recommended Harvard to three of his mentees. He said Harvard looks for diversity, not just racially, but geographically. He said Santillan-Guzman checked all the boxes: A first-generation college student; Hispanic; from a rural area; and top-notch grades.

He mentioned Harvard to Santillan-Guzman, who just said, "Oh." But two weeks later, he told Noonan he'd applied.

"He's a young man who has a tremendous amount of initiative," Noonan said. "Harvard sees itself as nurturing future leaders, future global leaders, and I see that in him," Noonan said. "It's in the way he holds himself, the way he presents himself."

Santillan-Guzman is president of the Juntos Club, an Oregon State University program for Latino students that holds cultural events throughout the year, and helps students find their path to higher education.

A straight-A student in high school, Santillan-Guzman can't identify a weak subject. His only bad grade was a C he got once in fourth grade because he didn't make an Oregon Trail wagon.

His mom, Elida, said after she whooped and cried and hugged her son, she "looked up and thanked God. We were about to have dinner and it ended up getting cold because we could not eat out of excitement."

She was shaking at the news, "and I could only think, 'He did it. My son did it.'"

# Mobile Vax event May 7 in The Dalles

## Wasco County moved to Extreme Risk April 30; walk-ins now welcome at vaccine clinics

This Friday, May 7, a mobile vaccine clinic will visit several local restaurant/pubs and offer the one-and-done Johnson & Johnson vaccine, and all participants will receive \$10 in tokens for food.

"This is a fun way to make the vaccine easily accessible to the public," said Dr. Miriam McDonell, Health Officer for North Central Public Health District.

NCPHD has made use of a van provided by Wasco County to do mobile vaccine clinics. The mobile clinic will run from 5 p.m. until about 9 p.m., and will begin at Freebridge Brewing, then at around 6:15 p.m. will head to the Bargeway Pub for awhile, and then wrap up at about 7:45 p.m. Sunshine Mill Artisan Plaza and Winery. More establishments may be added later.

Participants will receive the free vaccine and two \$5 tokens imprinted with the saying "Take a Bite out of COVID." The tokens must be redeemed that evening for food.

Participants will be vaccinated in the mobile van and then will hang out in provided chairs on the sidewalk for a 15-minute observation period.

Event promoter Nolan Hare plans to take advantage of the convenient event to get his vaccine. "I'm looking forward to being first in line when the mobile vaccine clinic comes to the Bargeway. It's encouraging to see local county leadership and the health district partnering with local businesses to meet people where they are, and provide vaccinations in a comfortable, convenient setting. I hope everyone takes advantage of this opportunity."

"This is an opportunity for us to meet citizens where they are and bring the vaccine to them, if they choose

to get it," said Tyler Stone, Wasco County administrative officer. "This is also a way to support businesses."

For more information, visit COVID-19 Vaccine in Oregon, contact North Central Public Health District at 541-506-2600, visit on the web at www.ncphd.org or find them on Facebook.

### Extreme Risk

With 74 cases of COVID-19 in Wasco County in the most recent 14-day period, and a rapid surge in cases and hospitalizations statewide, the county is one of 15 that moved to the extreme risk category on April 30.

In the "extreme risk of community spread" category, only outdoor dining is allowed, and closing time is 11 p.m. Outdoor seating can now be 100, up from 50. Gyms can have six members in attendance at a time; churches are at 25 percent indoor capacity; stores 50 percent capacity; and theaters can have only six people

per shared space. Offices are required to do work remotely and close to the public, if possible. Long term care facilities can have outdoor visitation only.

Schools can continue with hybrid or in-person learning models in the extreme risk category. Schools can limit to distance learning only as needed to address current transmission within a school. In recognition of the lower transmission risk from being outdoors, capacity at outdoor sporting events is increased from 50 to 100.

Changes to risk categories were not due to happen for another week, but due to the surge in cases and hospitalizations, Gov. Kate Brown announced risk category updates today. She urged Oregonians to get vaccinated, saying it is the fastest way to lift health and safety restrictions.

Kathy Schwartz, a Wasco County commissioner and the chair of North Central Public Health District's board of health, echoed that,

saying, "My message is to get vaccinated to keep our economy driving. I'm hopeful that vaccine acceptance will increase," said Schwartz, a registered nurse who volunteers as a vaccinators at local vaccine clinics.

In Wasco County, 38.53 percent of the total population has received at least one dose of vaccine. That slightly lags the statewide total of 40.2 percent.

North Central Public Health District's vaccine

clinics have numerous openings. To book an appointment, visit [www.ncphd.org/book-vaccine](http://www.ncphd.org/book-vaccine).

### Walk-ins

NCPHD also started taking walk-ins at their clinics on April 29. The clinic are at the Fort Dalles Readiness Center, 402 E. Scenic Drive (next to Columbia Gorge Community College).

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**TRASH TALK**

**Q.** Is there a place where can I take old computers, VCR's and other electronics for recycling?  
Jared, The Dalles

**A.** Jared, I don't know of any local options for VCR or stereo recycling. You do have an option in our area for "e-waste" though. The Oregon Electronics Recycling Program (E-Cycles) accepts seven items for free: computer monitors and towers, T.V.s, laptops, printers, keyboards and mice. Three drop sites: Hood River Transfer Station, The Dalles Disposal, and Sherman County Transfer Station near Biggs Junction.

questions to:

**Tri-County**  
Hazardous Waste & Recycling Program  
(541)-506-2636 [www.tricountyrecycle.com](http://www.tricountyrecycle.com)