

From Hermiston High to Capitol Hill

Vasquez, Hermiston High School Class of 1968, was honored Feb. 12 as Distinguished Alumnus of the year

By JESSICA POLLARD
STAFF WRITER

Victor Vasquez was born in Texas. He's been around the world: to Guam, to Turkey and plenty of places in between for work. But as the 2020 Hermiston High School Distinguished Alumnus, he'll always consider Eastern Oregon his home.

"I do believe that Hermiston has produced a lot of really good leaders. Even now, Hermiston behaves like a village," he said. "I always tell people I'm from Hermiston."

Vasquez was born in 1949. His father, a World War II veteran from Mexico and for some time a single parent, took up migrant farm work to keep their family afloat. It took Vasquez and his siblings all over the Pacific Northwest.

And when their father landed a job at the Umatilla Chemical Depot, they enrolled in the Hermiston School District. Vasquez was a first grader.

"They called us monolinguals. I didn't know a single word of English," he said.

He may have started his education speaking only Spanish, but credits the school district with teaching him to speak and read English at an early age.

"I had absolutely no accent. That really comes from some of the early education I got," he said.

Vasquez was far from

a star student back in high school.

"We were relatively low-income. I worked when I was in school," he said. "I didn't excel."

But he said that's one reason why he was so honored to receive this year's Distinguished Alumni award at the Distinguished Citizens Awards early February.

"You can't judge yourself by how you're doing in high school," he said.

Vasquez didn't, and it brought him a long way.

Nearing graduation in the late 1960s, his school counselor urged him to head to trade school instead of a university.

But Vasquez wanted to go to college, like his art teacher had encouraged him to do. He just wasn't sure how to afford it. So he joined the military in the midst of the Vietnam War.

"It was quite a risk for anyone to volunteer then," he said. "But when you don't have money it's the only option."

He served for two years, and was honorably discharged after the then-president of Blue Mountain Community College wrote a letter requesting it, which allowed Vasquez to gain his associates degree. He focused in on getting good grades.

After he got his bachelor's degree at University of Oregon, Vasquez eventually attended the Kennedy



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan
Victor Vasquez, left, is awarded the Distinguished Alumnus of the Year award by Hermiston School District Superintendent Tricia Mooney at the 50th Annual Distinguished Citizens Awards in Hermiston Wednesday night.

School of Harvard to study organizational development.

He said initially, the school sent him an invitation to apply but he didn't take the opportunity because he thought finances would be an issue. Eventually, an administrator convinced him.

"It wasn't something I planned on. It was in front of me, and I ended up taking it," he said.

From there Vasquez's professional success bloomed. For six years, he worked for the State of Ore-

gon, including under Governor Barbara Roberts doing work with rural counties. Later, he was appointed by President Bill Clinton as a deputy administrator for the USDA and again to serve as a deputy assistant secretary under the Department of Defense.

Vasquez takes the word "servant" in public servant quite seriously.

"How much can I do while I'm here?" he asks. "We're only there temporarily. This is something that's been granted to us,

we're here to serve."

During his time with the USDA in the 1990s, he spearheaded economic development programs for rural areas.

His proudest accomplishment from the job was launching the Rural Empowerment Zone and Enterprise Communities program.

"I worked in some of the poorest communities of the country. It was grassroots economic development," he said. "In a lot of areas we reduced the poverty level, it was very impactful."

After some time outside of Washington D.C, he was appointed as deputy under-secretary for USDA Rural Development in 2009, by President Barack Obama.

He remained in the position until he fell in love and got married to a woman in south Texas in 2011.

"When you're in love you'll do anything. She didn't want to go to D.C.," he said. "So I went to Texas."

Vasquez started a consulting firm there. And while he still lives in Texas today, he's currently taking on a role as interim director of a Salem-based organization called MERIT, which aids people in small business development. He lives with family in Keizer.

Vasquez has plenty of positive Hermiston memories. He has only missed two high school reunions, and can still remember when Main Street got its first street light. But he said that growing up, he faced his own challenges and for that he has advice for young Hermistonians.

First and foremost, stay in touch with family.

"Whether you believe it or not you'll get a lot from your family," he said.

"People aren't always welcoming," he added. "Don't let it affect you are. When you need help, ask for help. Pay attention to the lessons you're learning now."

Vasquez, from the Class of 1968, will give a keynote speech at the Hermiston High School Graduation on June 4 this year.

Suspended driver's licenses create hardships

By JADE MCDOWELL
NEWS EDITOR

When Sheena Tarvin got a ticket for not wearing her seat belt in 1998, she had no idea the profound consequences it would have on her life.

"I was only 18 years old, and no one ever told me that if I didn't pay the ticket right away, they could suspend my license," Tarvin said.

That's what happened after her fine got sent to collections, however.

At age 42, the Hermiston resident has yet to get her driving privileges back.

Oregonians can get their license suspended or revoked for dozens of reasons.

Most of them are driving-related crimes, such as driving while under the influence of intoxicants, hit-and-run, eluding police or assault with a motor vehicle. People can also get their license suspended for driving unsafely — drivers will have their license suspended for 30 to 90 days if convicted of driving more than 100 miles per hour, for example, or can get their license restricted for having too many crashes and/or tickets within a certain time period.

Some reasons for suspending a driver's license



The Department of Motor Vehicles office in Hermiston.

are based more on finances than driving record, however.

Currently, the state can suspend a license indefinitely for failure to pay child support, or for up to 20 years for not paying traffic tickets.

In Tarvin's case, after the bill got sent to a collections agency, her daughter was born prematurely, and she couldn't pay the steep hospital bills.

Those became the priority for collections, and the

months stretched into years without progress paying off her traffic ticket.

As many in her situation do, Tarvin eventually found herself in a position where she felt like she had to drive to work even though she didn't have a license. And when she did, she got a ticket for driving with a suspended license, adding

to the bill she hasn't been able to finish paying off yet.

"I'm not trying to make excuses," she said. "I know I messed up over the years. But this is the timeline."

After she separated from her husband three years ago, she could no longer depend on him for rides. She has a club foot that doesn't allow her to walk

long distances, and a bus ride to the grocery store and back is a two-hour round trip.

Her story includes homelessness, a drug addiction and jail time. She said her life is back on track now — she's living in a trailer, done with probation and is coming up on a year sober in March. But all of that was made far more difficult by the fact that she couldn't drive herself to court dates, drug tests, classes, counseling and other parts of her recovery process.

"All of these things, I have to get there," she said. "I try every day. I went through treatment, but had it not been for people in the community, there is no way I could have done it."

The state does allow for hardship permits in some cases, giving people with suspended licenses permission to drive to work, doctors appointments and other essential trips.

However, applying for a hardship permit costs \$125, and the permits aren't available for all types of suspensions.

House Bill 4065, introduced during the current legislative session, would

prevent situations like Tarvin's in the future by removing the state's ability to suspend licenses solely on the basis of unpaid traffic tickets. As currently written, it would not undo current suspensions, however.

"It's definitely been a hindrance in my life not to have it," Tarvin said. "I can't catch up. I've felt like a failure my whole adult life because of it."

Jason Estle, who works with Hermiston's down-and-out at Desert Rose Ministries, said he has seen many cases like Tarvin's over the years.

"It makes it very difficult to keep a job, because they're always trying to find a ride," he said. "... It's something we see commonly in our ministry, guys struggling to keep a job when they're on foot. It's not very convenient."

He said when people are getting their life back on track, moving beyond a former "lifestyle of irresponsibility," there's a fine line between being too soft or too hard on them. However, he said taking someone's driver's license can be a real hindrance to taking on other responsibilities.

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