

THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

Scholarship graduate beats some tough odds

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Raquel Gabbitas moved 33 times before graduating from Provo High in 2004, the child of teen parents who worked 80-hour weeks at bad jobs. She knew that sort of life wasn't for her, but she faced huge cultural and economic hurdles to attend college. Thanks in part to the McNair Scholars Program, designed to boost the ranks of minorities in graduate programs, she will be among 412 students receiving bachelor's degrees during Westminster College's commencement exercises today at the E Center. The psychology major is headed to the University of Minnesota's Institute of Childhood Development to work on a doctorate in neuroscience. Her goal is to secure a tenure-track faculty position in neuroscience and use her research to help low-income elementary school students.

"I want to do compelling research that elucidates how poverty influences adolescents. People don't know how much it affects the way we learn things," said Gabbitas, 22, who roamed among Utah, New Mexico and Arizona before college. "I grew up all over the place," she said. "We lived in three states, mostly in Provo, Santa Fe, Albuquerque, Tucson and Phoenix. I went to five different elementary schools."

She knew college was her ticket to the life she wanted. Her family lacked the resources to send her to school, however, and she worked various restaurant jobs to raise money.

"Working those jobs and watching my parents come home exhausted made me want something more. . . . I knew I would have to get scholarships, so I had to do really well in school," she said.

Her initial choice was the University of Utah, but then she met Westminster's recruiters, who sold her on the private liberal arts college's small class sizes and access to professors.

But cost was a big hitch. She had to work 30 hours a week and scrimp before the McNair benefits kicked in her sophomore year. Through McNair, she attended a research methodology conference in Berkeley, Calif., and became interested in going the distance as an academic.

"The goal [of McNair] is to find students from two groups, minorities and low-income, first-generation college students. Their numbers are woefully lacking in higher education," said program coordinator Keith Embray. Program participants receive tuition assistance, waivers for application and graduate school exam fees and \$2,800 summer stipends.

Although she felt out of place her first year in college, Gabbitas thrived at Westminster's intimate campus in Salt Lake City and was selected as a Truman Scholarship finalist.

"People believed in me and convinced me I was intelligent and could succeed," Gabbitas said. "I was angry with things my first year, but then I realized that I had a lot more power to change things through the education I was obtaining."

bmaffly@sltrib.com

The McNair Program

- * Ronald McNair, an astronaut, died in the 1986 space shuttle disaster.
- * The program launched in his memory is helping boost the ranks of low income/first generation students and underrepresented minorities in graduate programs.
- * After four years, 43 Utah students have attended McNair summer programs and 19 are in doctorate programs.

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