

Scholarship recipient first in family to attend college

Alex Perez seeks to make his late father proud

By Linda Barrett for ATSSA



Alex Perez remembers watching his father and uncle play video games for hours on their original Xbox and thinking it was “super cool,” so for his ninth birthday, Alex asked for the parts to build a computer.

The three of them then worked together on the project.

It’s a special memory and one that set the course for Alex’s future. Ever since, he has been hooked on computers and has made it his career goal, although he’s had some painful challenges to get on course.

The day before his first day of high school, and just two weeks after Alex turned 14, his mother awakened him and said they needed to get to Michigan fast.

His father, Julian Perez Ortega, had been injured on the job and was in the hospital.

They quickly left their Indianapolis home but didn’t make it to the hospital before Ortega died on Aug. 2, 2018.

“Afterwards, I ended up missing the first two weeks of school as we traveled to Washington state and California for my dad’s celebrations of life in places where he lived. It started me off badly for the rest of high school and my GPA was really bad,” he said.

Alex had friends in middle and high school who earned good grades and after hearing them talk about getting straight As, he was motivated to rally himself.

“I realized I have to work harder if I want to go to college and do good in life,” he said. Although it took a concerted effort, by the end of his sophomore year, he had raised his GPA to 4.3.

He also was motivated by the words he remembered most from his dad.

“He would always tell us that neither he nor my mom ever went to college, so he wanted me and my brothers to be the first to go and graduate. I know my father would be proud of all my accomplishments and especially for being the first in our family to attend college.”

Alex became a member of the National Honor Society, which involved numerous volunteer hours. He got involved in multiple sports including lacrosse, baseball and basketball. And throughout high school he received recognitions including a Character Award, Mental Attitude Award, Student of the

Month, High Honor Roll and Most Improved Player.

Alex is now in his sophomore year at Indiana University Bloomington where he is majoring in computer science after receiving direct admission for his freshman year into the Luddy School of Informatics, Computing and Engineering.

In his free time, he still plays video games and loves watching and playing basketball. He plans to work part time to help with college and living expenses. And although he doesn’t yet know his specific goals, his career interest is either computer science, software design or cybersecurity.

PRESSING ON DESPITE TRAGEDY

Alex’s father was in a work zone on M-25 in Fort Gratiot, Mich., training an onsite team and testing new locating equipment when a vehicle entered the area and fatally struck him on Aug. 1, 2018.

Ortega, 44, was a longtime employee of Digital Control Inc. as its North American Field Service Manager. Because he traveled so much for his job, Alex’s mother, Courtney Perez, had been a stay-at-home mom.

After his death, she needed to find a way to support Alex and his two younger brothers, Emilio, then 10, and Elias, then 7. That led her to start a real estate business flipping houses.

Julian Perez Ortega’s death meant his boys were left to grow up without their father, just as he had.

Ortega was born in Panama’s Chiriqui Province and immigrated

Alex Perez was a member of the National Honor Society, took part in multiple sports and was recognized for a Character Award during high school. His mother, Courtney Perez, and brothers Elias, left, and Emilio, right, celebrated his graduation from Lawrence North High School in Indianapolis in 2022.



Alex Perez was 8 years old when he enjoyed this go-kart ride with his father, Julian Perez Ortega, at an amusement park in Seattle, Wash.

to the United States at the age of 10. Speaking very little English, he worked hard and excelled at everything he touched. While he achieved the American dream for himself and his family, college was not part of his path.

He remained in touch with Panamanian roots and some of Alex's favorite memories include the two times the family visited Panama and he saw where his father grew up and got to visit the vast network of family members still residing there.

Alex Perez is one of 14 recipients of the Roadway Worker Memorial Scholarship awarded

by the ATSS Foundation for the 2023-24 academic year. It is the second time he has received the competitive scholarship that offers up to \$10,000 annually to provide financial assistance for post-high school education to dependents of roadway workers killed or permanently disabled in work zone incidents.

Students who demonstrate a strong commitment to volunteerism are eligible to apply for an additional \$1,000 given in honor of Chuck Bailey, a roadway safety member who died in 2002.

"I'm glad there is something like this out there for people who go through these specific tragedies to help them out," Alex said. "Big things like this scholarship are a great help to people who might not have good situations or opportunities and who want to go to college."

"I'm also thankful for my close group of friends. They helped me a lot and provided comfort. I think if I didn't have them to talk to, I'd feel lonely. I know a lot of people who lost their dad could go into a really dark place. It means a lot to be in college and have a future ahead of me. This scholarship will help me get through college without a ton of debt to start my adult life." //

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