

Donna & Wilfredo Vega

Nominated by *Robin DeLong*
Greater Southern Tier BOCES

It is with delight that I jointly nominate Donna and Wilfredo Vega as NYACCE Students of the Year. Their story is a compelling one and will serve as an inspiration to many students in similar situations.

Although her family stressed the value of education, Donna left school in the 11th grade. Her family was a broken one. Then she was pregnant before she was 18 years old. Unfortunately, she found herself in an abusive relationship and saw her dreams fade away. But, Donna is a strong lady! She was determined to leave her dismal situation and achieve success for her children's sake. Once she found her freedom, she met her current husband, Wilfredo. Wilfredo had good grades in school and was ahead of his class, but he became bored with school and left in the 10th grade. He worked many years in various skilled labor jobs. Donna and Wilfredo shared the same dream: They wanted to be positive role models for their children. They realized that it's difficult to urge your children to stay in school if you have not graduated yourself. They decided to get their diplomas together and to be each other's strength and encouragement.

Donna and Wilfredo moved their family from Philadelphia, PA, to Elmira, NY where they knew that the environment would be more conducive to achieving their goals. In July of 2008, Donna and Wilfredo came to GST BOCES to earn their high school diplomas through the External Diploma Program. While they worked diligently toward their diplomas, they also worked toward their careers in our Office Careers program. They both specialized in the Microsoft Office applications and earned Microsoft Office Specialist certifications in Word, Excel and PowerPoint. Donna and Wilfredo graduated with their high school diploma last June. They were proud of their achievements and even more proud to have their children in the audience to witness their graduation ceremony.

Donna and Wilfredo faced many challenges along the way. They did not have the support of relatives here in Elmira. Because both of them were taking classes together, they had to leave their three children at home (under the supervision of the oldest child) and hope for the best. Two of the three children have been diagnosed with multiple behavioral disorders, so there were some tense times for the family. In spite of these obstacles, Donna and Wilfredo had excellent attendance and motivation in completing their classes.

Donna started at the local community college in January, where she is working towards her Associate of Science degree in Business Administration. Her first year in college was so successful that she earned two scholarships towards this year's tuition. Donna continues to use her excellent computer skills in college. In fact, after giving a PowerPoint presentation in one of her classes, the word got around, and now she is teaching both professors and students to use PowerPoint for their presentations. This semester, Donna is on the Dean's List with a 3.67 GPA! After she graduates, she would like to get a job in Event Planning using her business skills. Wilfredo is supporting Donna's efforts and dreams by staying at home and caring for the children. He is enjoying the special time he has with their 4 year old son, teaching him some

Spanish, reinforcing the Chinese his son is learning from television, and teaching him pre-school skills. They both read to the youngest son and encourage him to read back to them.

Donna and Wilfredo know that the efforts they have demonstrated to their children have made a difference in all of their lives. Donna is a first generation high school graduate in her family, and now her oldest child is graduating from high school this year. There were many times when their daughter wanted to drop out, but Donna and Wilfredo fought to keep her in school. This same child is on the honor roll at school this semester, along with her brother.

When asked to describe the results of their achievements, Wilfredo says he feels a sense accomplishment. He actually finished something he started. The program was good for him because he learned skills that he hopes to use as he changes careers.

Donna says, "I have gained a sense of self-worth that I don't believe I ever had in my entire life. I feel as though I deserve to be happy now. Instead of running from the storm, I have learned to dance in the rain." Together, Donna and Wilfredo continue to work towards greatness.