

Giving Back

Urban Teaching Academy graduate returns to Hillsborough

CHRISTIE GOLD

As a nine-year-old Cuban immigrant, King High School teacher Leonel Garcia faced innumerable challenges: He spoke no English. He struggled to pass the reading section of FCAT. His third grade teacher recommended retention.

Today, as a first-year teacher at King High School, Garcia draws upon those early struggles to form connections with his students.

An alumni of Blake High School's Urban Teaching Academy (UTA), Garcia's college tuition was paid for if he agreed to return to Hillsborough County after graduation to teach for three years.

"Initially, I enrolled in the program because it was a way to pay for college," he said. "That was my only motivation."

It wasn't until he joined Junior Achievement and worked in a first grade classroom that he realized how much he wanted to teach.

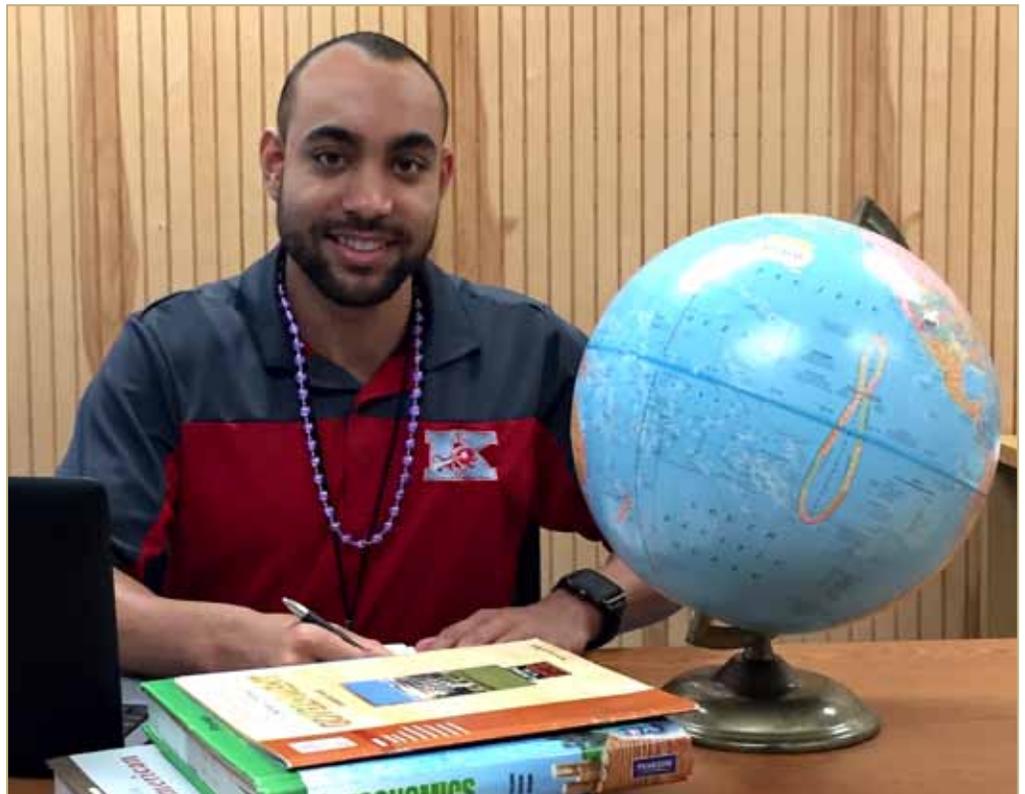
"That experience was great. I helped plan lessons, I worked with the children, and I got to see first-hand how much students appreciated a good teacher. For the first time, I realized that I could make a difference."

Garcia also credits his supervising teacher at Blake, Gwen Williams, with much of his success. "She always treated me equally. She explained that nobody was going to treat me differently because I was Hispanic. She would say, 'In the real world, you just have to work. If you work hard, you will be equal.'"

Garcia says Williams stressed the importance and value of hard work and perseverance. "I remember trying to take the test to earn Microsoft Office certification. Ms. Williams told her students not to worry about failing. She would say, 'If you fail, it won't hurt. It's the experience that matters. The extra work will benefit you. In the long run, that's what will matter most.'"

Williams remembers Garcia's determination to succeed. "He always exhibited such an academically focused mindset as he journeyed through his four-years in UTA."

Williams says this attitude led to his success in achieving Microsoft Industry Certification. Garcia



Social Studies Teacher Leo Garcia graduated from Blake High School's Urban Teaching Academy and now works at King High School where he teaches Economics, American Government and African American History.

was also named student teacher of the year.

After graduating from the University of West Florida, Garcia had offers to teach social studies from Chamberlain and Wharton, but it was Assistant Principal of Administration Yuri Higgins who convinced Garcia to choose King.

"Mr. Higgins said, 'Here's the thing. If you're one of my teachers, you will know that I've got you. You have to have me, too, but know that I've always got you.'"

Garcia teaches Economics, American Government and African American History.

He appreciates the feeling of unity at King, especially among his peers in Social Studies. "We spend a lot of time together both in and out of school. Everyone is helpful. There's a real sense of

camaraderie and cooperation."

Garcia feels his past helps him connect with his diverse student population.

"Over 99 percent of my students are nice and cooperative. The less than one percent who aren't have other things going on. I can relate. Students have challenges outside of school—language barriers, cultural barriers, family problems. I get that. I was an average student, a Hispanic kid struggling to learn English."

Garcia says that believing in students is an important step in removing the roadblocks to their success, and he wants his students to know that he is in their corner.

"I won't give up on them. It's like what Higgins said to me: 'I've got them.'"