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Dick Blume / Staff photographer

JULIO TORRES, 22, will graduate this month from Morrisville State College with an associate degree in architecture. He plans to transfer to Cornell University and eventually get a master's degree. Torres is from the Dominican Republic.

A First in His Family

Dominican native sees education as his salvation

By Alaina Potrikus
Staff writer

As a child in the Dominican Republic, Julio Torres would walk the streets looking for shoes to shine, selling candy and ice cream to make money for his family.

He never imagined that he'd be able to go to high school in the United States, let alone be the first person in his family to attend college.

Torres, 22, will graduate from Morrisville State College this month with an associate degree in architectural studies and design. He plans to transfer to Cornell University this summer, the first Morrisville student to be accepted into the school's architecture program.

His professors have praised Torres as a mature, responsible go-getter who will make a difference wherever his life takes him. He's received numerous accolades as graduation approaches, including the prestigious SUNY-wide Chancellor's Award for Student Excellence.

But for Torres, the achievement is

Graduation spotlight

Morrisville State College will hold its 96th commencement ceremony at 1 p.m. May 19 on Drake Field. In case of inclement weather, the event will be moved to the John W. Stewart Center for Student Activities.

The keynote address will be given by local entrepreneur and philanthropist Aminy Audi, co-owner of Manlius furniture-maker L. & J.G. Stickley.

about more than just plaques and certificates.

"When you're poor, you realize the only chance you have to be something is through an education," said the soft-spoken student. "This is my chance; I have to take advantage of it."

Torres was raised by his great-grandfather, sharing a house with about a dozen people in the La Romana province of the Dominican Republic. After spending his mornings in elementary school, he was sent to the streets to try to earn money, he said.

Did you know?

The Dominican Republic and Haiti share the island of Hispaniola in the Caribbean, which was explored and claimed by Christopher Columbus on his first voyage to the Americas in 1492.

■ The Dominican Republic is about twice the size of New Hampshire and is home to 9.3 million people.

■ The primary language is Spanish, and the main religion is Roman Catholic.

■ In recent years, the service sector has taken over traditional agricultural exports like sugar, coffee and tobacco as the economy's largest contributor, due to the growth of tourism.

Source: CIA World Factbook

But he still found time to learn and dream, he said. As a child, he would break apart radios he found in the trash, just so he could figure out how the device worked and put it back together. It was a stepbrother who first showed him a set of architectural blueprints, hoping to foster

TORRES, PAGE B-2

Torres heads to Cornell

TORRES, FROM PAGE B-1

his creativity at the tender age of 5.

"He wanted me to start learning," he said.

He moved to Puerto Rico at age 12, living in an apartment with seven people in a neighborhood where drive-by shootings were the norm. He came to the United States four years ago, settling in the Bronx with his aunt

and enrolling in high school, even though he couldn't speak English.

"I know a lot of people that would use that as an excuse not to go to school," he said. "But in life, you have more negative experiences than positive ones. If you sit there waiting, you're not going to go anywhere."

And prove them wrong he did. Torres took 20 credit hours in his final semester at Morrisville. He taught himself computer programs and improved his drafting and model-building skills outside of class so he would be mar-

ketable for competitive internships — nabbing two offers this summer alone.

"People say they don't know how I manage my time," he said with a smile. "You just sleep less and sometimes you don't eat."

Torres has returned to the Dominican Republic twice to visit family. He knows that's where he wants to settle after completing his education in the United States.

"That was always on my mind," he said.

Torres finds his motivation when he looks at the engravings on Dominican currency. The country's landmarks and monuments, he said, are mostly designed and built by foreign architects.

"I want to go and change some of those things," he said.

It won't be an easy road, but Torres said he has "big plans."

"When people say you can't do something, you should use that as motivation to prove them wrong," he said.

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