

Overcoming the odds

16-year-old Santa Maria High graduate headed to Notre Dame

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Brian Barriga admits he didn't have the typical childhood experience.

When he was 4, Brian's father was diagnosed with Meniere's disease, a disorder of the inner ear, and has been unable to work ever since. At 7, his mother and younger sister were deported to Mexico.

"I think it just drove me," Brian told the News-Press during a recent phone interview. "I knew that I needed to have a better future for my parents and I just wanted to help them out. They've done so much for me just so I could have an education."

Last month, Brian received his high school diploma from Santa Maria High School at the age of 16. He is the first member of his family to graduate high school and in the fall he will be heading to the University of Notre Dame.

Being the first in his family to attend college came with its challenges. Brian said the application process was difficult because he was trying to do it all by himself.

He was able to lean on community members and friends who have attended college, as well as the Scholarship Foundation of Santa Barbara.

He applied to more than 30 colleges, such as Ivy League schools Harvard and Yale. He also applied to other prestigious colleges such as UC Berkeley, Stanford and UCLA.

He plans on studying mechanical engineering and doing a double major in business or economics.



Santa Maria High graduate Bryan Barriga



Bryan Barriga, left, sits with other students at the Scholarship Foundation of Santa Barbara North County Awards at Alan Hancock College's Joe White Memorial Gymnasium on May 21.

Brian said he knew right away when he visited Notre Dame that he would be going there.

"Right when I visited campus, I knew that it was a place I belonged," he said.

He was raised Catholic and that was a big draw in determining his college choice.

Brian was awarded two local scholarships totaling \$4,000, including one from the foundation and one from the Kiwanis Club of Santa Maria.

During his high school years, Brian was a member of the Key Club, Alpine Club and the California Scholarship Federation. He was also part of New Crew, a group of upperclassmen who run the freshman orientation and help new students get acclimated to high school life.

He graduated with a 4.23 GPA, despite being two years younger than most of the graduates.

"At first it was a little terrifying being the smaller kid in class, but I was able to become part of the group and was just like everybody else," he said.

Brian will report to Notre Dame on Aug. 20 for orientation with other first-generation college students involved with the AnBryce Scholars program.

"He is an incredible student and obviously has a focused view of where he wants to go and where he wants to be," said Tim Dougherty, director of marketing and communications for the Scholarship Foundation of Santa Barbara. "Put all those things together and he makes the perfect recipient."

Brian was one of 2,447 students who received scholarships from the foundation this year. Fifty-two percent of the recipients are first-generation college students, Mr. Dougherty noted. The average GPA for the recipients was 3.87. In total, the foundation awarded \$7.98 million in scholarships.

Each applicant is awarded based on academic achievements, community participation and extracurricular activities. The foundation's main goal is to award students who are most likely to complete their undergraduate studies or attend graduate school, Mr. Dougherty said.

Historically, 81 percent of the foundation's scholarship recipients have completed their undergraduate programs in six years. The national average is 67 percent, Mr. Dougherty said.