



# Paying it Forward

Corporate volunteer David Martinez shares real-world skills with local students.

By Kelly O'Hara Dyer

Photos: Reflektions by Sheri

**D**avid Martinez, 32, sees the role he plays as a Junior Achievement volunteer as part of a natural cycle: When he was younger, many hands reached out to help him succeed, and today, he in turn tries to pass that legacy of giving back on to others.

Martinez, who still has the trim, compact build of the high school and college wrestler he once was, is both earnest and thoughtful as he talks about the personal importance volunteerism and mentoring have to him. He is matter-of-fact when he says that education changed his life, and today, he's interested in giving others that same opportunity.

Martinez works as an implementation manager for Wells Fargo's Image Relationship Management group in Minneapolis, which manages the company's check image exchange relationships with other banks. He splits the rest of his hours between attending night classes for his soon-to-be-finished MBA from Bethel University; as a husband and father to two children, Miles, 4, and Lydia, one-and-a-half, and working tirelessly on a variety of volunteer efforts, including those at JA.

As a Puerto Rican native who moved to the Twin Cities area with his mother when he was 7 after his parents divorced, Martinez is particularly interested in efforts that serve the Latino/Hispanic community. He points to several times in his past where he received help that allowed him to move forward from a potentially "at risk" student in a minority group to a successful business person.

When he arrived in Minnesota, Martinez spoke little English, and he attended a school for students who needed to learn English as a second language. As the oldest of six kids, Martinez also grew up in a "very low-income family" headed by his mother, who at times needed to rely on public assistance. He attended school in St. Paul, and would later attend the University of Minnesota, where he earned a degree in global studies. (In a surprising twist, Martinez spent a semester during his senior

year studying in Santiago, Chile with about 25 students from all across the U.S. It was there that he met his wife, Meredith, who as it turned out, lived only 10 miles away from him in St. Paul.)

Before he started his freshman year at the U, Martinez said he benefited greatly from a program where at-risk high school graduates were enrolled in an outreach effort designed to help them succeed at—and eventually graduate from—the University.

"When I went to the U, I was in a program called Summer Institute. It was for kids who were at risk for not continuing on in school but who had a decent GPA. The U spent the whole summer with us, teaching us about everything from financial aid to higher education to just 'living,'" he says. "There were about 100 of us in [that group], Native American kids, African-American, Latino and Asian."

The program gave Martinez the boost he needed to succeed at the U, and it also introduced him to a diverse community of individuals who would go on to become his fraternity brothers.

"A group of about 12 of us got together from that [program] and formed a sub-group, a multicultural fraternity called Sigma Lambda Beta," he says. "That was a great support group for me through college. Our principles were brotherhood, scholarship, leadership, community service and cultural awareness, because we were all diverse. We were 18, 19, 20 years old...[but] based on those principles, we started doing a lot of community service and giving back right away. We formed our own mentoring programs, and we would go out to schools. It's just part of who we are," he adds, noting that the sense of community he found in the group mirrored what he's come to see in the Latino community and in other minority populations as a whole. "It's just a reality in a lot of minority and diverse communities that we are very family- and community-oriented because it's like you're in survival mode [in daily life]. Everybody is helping each other out."

Throughout college, Martinez and his frat brothers volunteered to help with school fundraisers, to help younger students learn to read, and

with a program they started called "Homework and Hoops, where "we played basketball with kids and then helped mentor them."

With this as a backdrop, Martinez credits the focused efforts of Wells Fargo's volunteerism initiatives with giving him an introduction to JA.

"I initially got involved in around 2006, 2007 through Wells Fargo," Martinez says. "[Wells has] a JA Corporate Council, a group of 15 to 20 individuals who are very involved with JA and they encourage people to get involved."

Martinez first volunteered to assist at a JA BizTown event and was delighted with the experience.



"We went to the facility and there were about 100 kids in the room getting ready to go run the city. My job was to sit with them and help them form their business strategies and it was really cool. From there, I just continued volunteering.

"Over the past three years, I decided to focus specifically on Spanish immersion schools...What we proposed last year was to go into a school and do a JA in a Day in Spanish

at Adams [Spanish Immersion school in St. Paul], and I think it was the first time that had been done. I think we had 27 classrooms involved. We're doing it again in May for grades K-6."

Martinez has also been actively involved with JA by teaching the "JA: It's My Business" program for the last few weeks at the international baccalaureate Anwatin Middle School in Minneapolis. The program is designed to get students thinking entrepreneurially, and Martinez smiles as he recounts some of his recent interactions with the class.

"[It's all about] getting them to think of ideas of products or services that they could form a business around, and we talk about famous business people who've launched products and how they get started. It gets them thinking, 'Wow, this is something that I could really do,'" says Martinez. "That's really the conversation that we're having. Once you get them engaged, they really come up with some interesting things."

A few of those "interesting ideas" include a girl who pondered the possibilities of creating a flying car (Martinez says he just read about a new start-up created by MIT aeronautical engineers that is offering just that). Another student suggested creating glow-in-the-dark book pages for reading at night, and a third student was enthusiastic about creating unbreakable three-ring binders made of metal that could be personalized and embellished with magnets.

Martinez intends to keep volunteering with JA, and he also has his sights set on finding more ways to work within the Latino community through education to help improve the graduation success rates of students.

"That's what I'm really passionate about," he says. "I try to find every opportunity I can to be doing that kind of work." ▲

Each year, JAUM engages more than **7,000** volunteers, mostly business professionals, who share their knowledge with local students. Through leadership and mentoring, volunteers help students make a connection between what they learn in school and how it can be applied in the real world.