

Rags to riches story

GPHS student who overcame adversity wins \$20,000 Horatio Alger scholarship

By Patti Richter
of the Daily Courier

When Lisa Esposito walks across the stage at Grants Pass High School to accept her diploma Friday night, she will have achieved her longtime goal.

The 17-year-old senior knows it isn't a lofty goal, especially when compared to the goals set by some of her classmates. Then again, she is not a typical high school senior.

Since April, Esposito has been living on her own after a high school career spent shuffling between the homes of family members and friends and a new school almost every year.

While some of her classmates are complaining about not having the latest clothes, or having to drive their mother's minivan, Esposito worries about paying rent and putting dinner on the table.

"I'm an outcast here," she said. "My classmates have no clue what the real world is like. It's so different from high school. I know I'm different. I feel too old for my age."

Esposito parlayed her life experience into a \$20,000 Horatio Alger National Scholarship that can be spread out over her college career.

She is one of 105 people in the nation who received the scholarship that provides financial assistance to students in financial need who "have

exhibited integrity and perseverance in overcoming personal adversity."

"I almost didn't fill out the application because I thought I didn't have a chance," Esposito said. "But I'm really proud of myself for getting the scholarship."

Coleen Moore thought she had a good shot at the scholarship. Moore, who is a secretary in the high school's student services area, works with students on scholarships, getting college credits and helping them choose careers. She got to know Esposito when she worked as one of her student aides as a junior.

"She is an incredible kid," Moore said. "I love her to pieces. I've seen where Lisa came from and I'm amazed at how she has turned out. She deserves this scholarship. She has to have a chance."

Esposito says her home life has never been stable. She moved to Grants Pass from Arizona when she was 12, joining her older sister, April, who was living in Grants Pass with an aunt.

In Arizona, Esposito was shuttled between her mother and father's houses after they divorced when she was 2 years old. Both had drug problems.

She recalled incidents where her mother shoved forks into the floor slats to try to prevent people from coming to get them and another when her mother claimed the government had wired their house.

"She asked me if she was crazy," Esposito said. "I told her she wasn't crazy but she needed to get help."

In Grants Pass, the two sisters lived with their aunt for a while.

Things weren't working out and Esposito moved in with

another relative, a pattern that repeated itself for almost four years.

She started classes at North Middle School as a seventh-grader and changed schools almost every year. She attended high school at Rogue River, Hidden Valley and finally Grants Pass.

The Horatio Alger scholarship has been a "life-changing" experience for Esposito. In addition to the money for college, she received an all-expenses paid trip for a week to Washington, D.C., and a laptop computer.

The plaque and medal she received from the scholarship association now hang on her living room wall.

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But she almost didn't make it to D.C. Esposito didn't have any professional looking clothing and couldn't afford to purchase any. Moore wouldn't let that stop Esposito.

She sent out a letter explaining the situation to fellow staff members and teachers, asking for some help on Esposito's behalf. Moore received \$1,000 in donations and they used it to buy Esposito the necessary attire and another teacher took her to get her hair cut and nails done.

"The staff here is amazing," Moore said. "We really support kids in need and rally behind them."

Esposito said she could not believe the generosity of the staff at the high school.

"They are great," she said. "Going to Washington, D.C., meant everything to me. I cried when I found out how much they helped me, that I can try to be more than my parents."

For Esposito, meeting the other scholarship recipients was a chance to feel like she

was normal for a change. "They all had lives like mine," she said. "They understood what I've been through."

To pay her bills, Esposito works a 40-hour week at Burger King where she has worked for the last two years. She is out of school around noon and has a couple of hours off to do homework and run errands

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before starting her evening shift.

“It was a struggle,” Esposito added. “I had trouble early on. School got in the way of work and vice versa. For a while, I got my priorities mixed up.

“I have to work to live and I need to go to school to get a better job,” she said. “So it is hard.”

She shares the expenses of an apartment with her boyfriend, Matt Hogan, who graduated last year from Grants Pass.

The two were living in the garage of a friend's house when Moore intervened earlier this year and helped them find the apartment.

This fall, she plans to attend Rogue Community College for two years to work on a degree in business management and accounting. Esposito wants to transfer to a four-year university or college after that.

She plans to continue working at Burger King to pay expenses her scholarship doesn't cover. Esposito credits some of her ability to go to college to Moore.

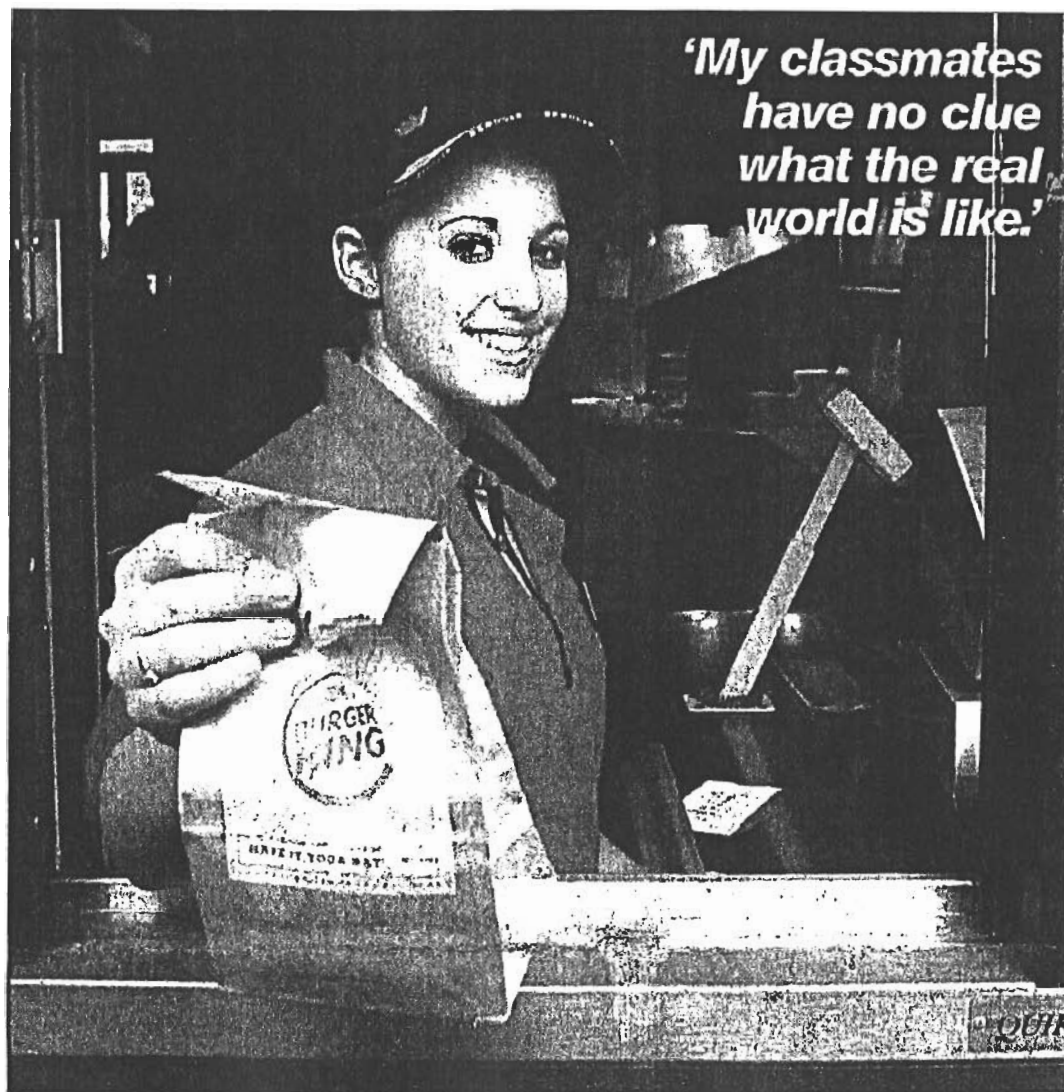
“She has always backed me. She's been like a mom to me,” Esposito said. “She's my guardian angel.”

Esposito is thrilled at the prospect of taking classes this fall.

“I'm so happy. Right now, I have everything going for me. I'm going to college,” she said.

“I wouldn't change anything about my life,” Esposito added. “Otherwise, I might not appreciate how much I have now.”

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JIM KROIS/Daily Cour

Burger King employee Lisa Esposito, a Grants Pass High School senior, has won one of just 105 Horatio Alger Scholarships awarded around the country.