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## Overcoming adversity no stranger to award winner

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Peter Ruggiero is no stranger to success.

Ruggiero, a senior at Warwick Veteran's Memorial High School, not only sports a 3.3 GPA, but he's also a three-letter athlete—playing varsity football (he's a co-captain), baseball and wrestling.

But Ruggiero never expected to be selected to win the 2009 Horatio Alger scholarship award.

"The Horatio Alger National Scholars have amazing stories..." said David L. Sokol, president and chief executive officer of the Horatio Alger Association in a press release. "In the current economic climate with many students struggling to find funding for college, we are delighted to be awarding so many scholarships to deserving youth."

The scholarship, worth more than \$20,000 and granted to just 104 of the 47,000 students across the country who applied for it, is given to students who've struggled with adversity but thanks to hard work, determination and perseverance, have been successful anyway.

Ruggiero wasn't even going to apply for the award, but at the behest of his Spanish teacher, Carmen Pina—who won the award in 1995—he took a shot.

"I didn't apply for any other scholarships, so I figured I would apply for this one," said Ruggiero.

"I did not expect to win this at all."

But Ruggiero has never really been one to succumb to obstacles.

During an interview last Friday, Ruggiero seemed uncomfortable talking about the adversities he's battled—likely due to his sense of modesty. But when pressed, he opened up a bit, and his father, Peter Ruggiero Sr., offered more details.

Ruggiero had many circumstances that would have led educators to qualify him as an "at risk" student for graduation.

As a young boy, both of Ruggiero's parents struggled with various levels of substance abuse. The two went through a messy divorce when he was elementary school-aged.

After his mom was awarded custody, Ruggiero was forced to move, and therefore change schools, several times in as many years beginning when he reached junior high school. For approximately the last six years, he's been living with his father.

Regardless of where he was living, money was always tight, Ruggiero said.

No matter. Like a character out of a Horatio Alger novel, which features rags to riches stories, Ruggiero always found a way to succeed.

"I'm so proud of him. Peter has always been an achiever with such a positive, get up and go attitude. When he wants to do something, he does it," said Ruggiero Sr.

Ruggiero and his father have a close relationship. Ruggiero's father works full-time at Tony Papa's in Cranston, and he works there part-time.

In addition to the scholarship, Ruggiero was sent on an all expense paid trip to the nation's capital, where he was able to network with not only students from across the country, but also with big business leaders and high government officials—a diverse group of people that have all struggled with adversity.

Ruggiero met Indra K. Nooyi, the President, Chief Financial Officer and Director of PepsiCo, the world's largest soft drink maker. Nooyi, though from a middle class upbringing in India and certainly no Slumdog Millionaire, shot up the corporate ladder like a meteor.

Such upward mobility is almost unimaginable given that she's from a country that encourages women to focus on making themselves marketable for marriage, not the corporate world.

Ruggiero also personally met with Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas—the court's second and only current African American.

"He's a really cool guy," said Ruggiero of Justice Thomas.

Ruggiero described certain moments of his trip as surreal.

"It was unbelievable. I'm walking into a room with the rest of the students and there's Justice Thomas giving us a standing ovation."

Ruggiero was also given an authentically signed letter from First Lady Michelle Obama, which encouraged him to volunteer in public service.

Despite his busy schedule, Ruggiero already makes time for volunteer work. He is active with St Mary's Church, the Cranston American Little League, the Cranston Babe Ruth League and Rhode Island Health Expo.

Ruggiero said he's thankful for the opportunity to meet heavy hitters like Nooyi and Thomas, but also cherishes the friendships he formed with students from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

"I got made fun of because of my accent. And people from other regions in America don't know what a bubbla is," joked Ruggiero.

Ruggiero said that hearing the stories of his newfound friends put his own problems into perspective. Ruggiero said his struggles seemed mild when compared to some of the other scholarship recipients at the Washington conference.

Ruggiero is looking forward to attending the University of Rhode Island next year, where, thanks to the Horatio Alger scholarship as well as financial aid, he will graduate with minimal debt.