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**HOW A TEACHER, VIDEO GAMES, AND A FRESH START  
CHANGED ONE STUDENT'S COURSE**

*"I've played video games since I was little, but I had no idea that learning how to make my own game would change how I feel about school and my future."*

OLATHE, KS, 15 May 2006 - To listen to Rafael Jr. Gomez tell his story, it conjures up a cautionary tale about a student facing an uncertain future. Stories similar to his, unfortunately, are found throughout the hallways and classrooms across America. For many students, including Gomez, education didn't represent options and a future, but an agonizing routine repeated day after day.

"I wasn't really looking for anything. I would just wake up in the morning and go to school. I just waited for the end of the day. But I wanted to learn," Gomez said.

Torn with the decision of continuing to pursue education or look for alternatives, Gomez knew the decision his parents wanted him to make. "I didn't know what I wanted to do in my life," Gomez said. "My parents are from Mexico, and have always told me that I need to work hard and do my best. They wanted me to go farther than they did."

Before leaving Mexico, Gomez explains that his father made it through the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, his mother through the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. "We want you to pass us'," Gomez said his parents repeatedly tell him. "They had to go straight to work and they wanted me to get a good education so that I could choose my future."

It wasn't until Gomez transferred to Haven High School and enrolled in Mr. Duft's Technology I & II class that things began to change. Gomez admits that past circumstances which he didn't wish to discuss precipitated the change of schools. He went on to say that he is only focused on his future now, and the opportunity to prove himself. "When I came here, it was a new start. Nobody knew me. Nobody knew anything and I could show myself of who I wanted to be," Gomez said.

"In my years of teaching, I've seen a lot of kids come and go just like Rafael. It wasn't that he didn't want to learn or couldn't. He just hadn't found the topic that got him excited about learning," said Steve Duft, Industrial Technology Teacher, Haven High School.

Gomez credits Mr. Duft's Video Game Development class for changing his perception about school. "Once that I saw that I could do better at one thing, making my video game, I knew that I could do better at the others," he said.

The sudden change in his attitude made both his parents and teachers take notice. "It was the first time since I've been teaching a technology class that a student showed up before school to do extra

work. Seeing a student that hadn't found a lot of success in school so far, come in and be engaged was real exciting for me," Duft said, "It was exciting to see Rafael come through the door early in the morning. It really lifted me up knowing that the class was making a difference for somebody."

Gomez reflects on how his new attitude toward school made his mom suspicious. "At first my mom asked what I was doing in my technology class, and I said that I'm making a video game. And she asked me if I was just messing around or learning. I told her, 'You don't understand, I'm making a video game, I'm learning programming.'"

Duft said that Gomez didn't let bumps in the road stop him. "When he came to a problem, he didn't give up. He just kept trying and trying. He didn't try to rely on me for all the answers. He was determined to figure it out for himself."

For the first time in his education, Gomez felt like he had the power to control his future. "After being in Mr. Duft's class and learning to program video games, I feel better about myself - I feel proud of what I did."

A Kansas educational software company, I Support Learning, Inc., developed the Video Game Development curriculum implemented this year by Mr. Duft. The program's design gives students an opportunity to see how learning math, science, language, and technology can be fun and rewarding.

As "virtual interns," students get to work for a high-tech company where they interact with bosses, customer, and co-workers. To complete the feel of working at a real job, the students receive emails, voicemails, faxes, and picture phone calls all simulated in the software.

"The students are learning so much more than programming," said Steve Waddell, owner and lead developer for I Support Learning. "They're learning important job and life skills. We make all their learning relevant by giving them real problems that require real solutions."

From his own experience in the working world, Duft wanted to bring a sense of ownership and responsibility to his class. "I think the students stay on task more because they have to. If they don't follow the curriculum then they're going to get lost," Duft explains. "I'm not going to give them the answers. I play the role of supervisor and treat them like they're on the job."

Juana Gomez, Rafael's mother, acknowledges how the class has changed her son. "Because of Mr. Duft's class on video game programming, we have seen Rafael's grades improve and his overall excitement for his future return. We always knew that he was capable."

While the ending to Gomez's story is still unfolding, he believes that his future now involves education. "I think this will help me in my future job because I know now how I have to listen, pay attention, and focus. I feel better prepared now."

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