Standout student once was homeless

By COLIN M. STEWART

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“Did you hear about the rose that grew from a crack in the concrete?”

So begins a poem penned by Tupac Shakur, the 1990s hip-hop pioneer, writer and actor who was tragically gunned down at the height of his popularity in 1996. Much like the rose, Shakur hailed from hard-scrabble beginnings, but using the force of his will and the strength of his talent, the rapper grew to touch the lives of millions through his art.

That's a story of transformation that University of Hawaii at Hilo English major Anthony Holzman-Escareno, 24, finds to be incredibly inspiring. Especially considering his own background.

“The whole time I was homeless, I was always reading and writing. I was writing rap, and stuff like that. … And, I know he (Shakur) gets a bad rap, but he was definitely an intellectual,” Holzman-Escareno says. “He read all these books. Classics. And I wanted to read them, too. ‘The Prince,’ ‘The Art of War,’ ‘A Raisin in the Sun,’ Robert Frost, Emily Dickinson.”

On Saturday, May 12, the former high school dropout who once spent time in juvenile detention for robbery will share his own messages of hope and reflect on the hard work and accomplishments of his classmates as UH-Hilo’s honored Class of 2012 student speaker.
Holzman-Escareno said he, his sister, Juliana, and mother, Laura Bronson, have seen hard times, and for a period of about a year-and-a-half he often called the walls of a cardboard box "home."

"We were staying out at the Ala Moana beach park (on Oahu). ... One night, I was up on a roof, looking out at all the highrises. I remember seeing all the people out on their porches," he said. "I thought, no matter how hard life was, it wasn’t worth living it out of a box."

Eventually, Holzman-Escareno came to live with his grandmother, Nancy Dunn, in East Hawaii.

“She said we could live at her house, but the only thing was that we had to go to school, or do something," he said.

Although he had dropped out of high school in ninth-grade, Holzman-Escareno was able to pass what is known as a Compass Test, which assesses a student’s basic understanding of reading, writing and math. From there, he was able to enroll at Hawaii Community College, where he began his higher education. He received a great deal of positive reinforcement there, he said, and ultimately transferred to UH-Hilo to continue his studies.

“From then on, it was on,” he said with a laugh. “It was game time.”

English professor Jennifer Wheat remembers Holzman-Escareno from the moment he arrived at the school.

“I first had him in British Literature,” she said. “He was brand new to the university at that point. And he was not sure whether he was going to be able to do it or not. His first paper, it had lots of errors, but it also had this really penetrating observation of what we’d been reading. This was clearly someone who had put a lot of thought into it.

“... He kept taking literature classes, and doing better and better. And I could always count on him to come up with insights that no one else, including me, had thought of.”

Now a senior, Holzman-Escareno has managed to maintain a cumulative grade point average of 3.95, while earning a number of academic honors, including making the dean’s list for the College of Arts and Sciences, earning the Droste English Scholarship, and being published in the academic journal "Hohonu."

He has also spent more than three years on the staff of the student newspaper, Ke Kalahea, where he has served as the editor-in-chief and sports editor. He was also a student representative for the Assessment Support Committee during the 2009-10 school year and coaches Pop Warner football for the Wailoa Razorbacks.

Speaking of the remarkable path his life has followed, Holzman-Escareno said there were no tricks, nor any shortcuts, to achieving success.

“It’s not any secret,” he said Thursday. "It’s just like anything else. You’ve just gotta put your eyes on what you want and go get it. It’s about realizing there’s more opportunity for you than people give you credit for.

“Growing up, I heard the ‘You ain’t never going to be (expletive)’ line too many times. And it was those kind of things that made me want to prove myself."
Holzman-Escareno says he hopes to attend law school and eventually become a sports agent for NFL stars, like the protagonist of the film “Jerry Maguire.”

“And maybe write the biographies of my players,” he said.

His ultimate goal, he said, is to make plenty of money so that he can give his mother, sister and girlfriend, Assi Broan, a comfortable and happy life.

“And I hope that I can help other people some day. I want to start a homeless shelter for teenagers going through it,” he said.

He added that he would always be thankful for the help and understanding he received from his three favorite professors in the English department — Wheat, Seri Luangphinith and Mark Panek.

“I want to thank them almost more than anybody I can thank in my life,” he said. “They’ve opened my eyes to a lot of things. I can’t tell you how much. And I don’t know where I would have been without them. … They’ve invested themselves in me doing well, above and beyond the call of duty, and I appreciate that.”

Wheat said her own decision to take an interest in Holzman-Escareno’s success was all about recognizing the hard work he was putting into it.

“When you see someone who maybe hasn’t caught a whole lot of breaks in life, and they’re giving 100 percent, you want to make sure you match it,” she said. “It does my heart a great deal of good. I’m thrilled.”

The UH-Hilo Class of 2012 will hold its spring commencement ceremonies on Saturday, May 12, at 9 a.m. at the Edith Kanakaole Multipurpose Stadium. Hawaii Lt. Gov. Brian Schatz will deliver the keynote address.

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