

Southwest Florida Hispanic Chamber of Commerce
June 7, 2008
Kenneth P. Walker, Man of the Year

Estoy muy feliz de estar aqui.

Estoy sumamente agradecido en el dia de hoy de ser reconocido como el Hombre del ano por la Camara de Comercio Hispana del Suroeste de la Florida. La Camara y Edison College tienen varias metas en comun: apoyar aquellos que buscan mejorar sus vidas por medio de la educacion, apoyar la diversidad en nuestra comunidad y fortalecer nuestra economia regional apoyando nuestros empresarios y empresarias. Aun mas importante la Camara y Edison comparten el sueno de crear un futuro: un futuro de Esperanza.

I am sincerely honored to be named Man of the Year by the Southwest Florida Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, and to be recognized at this delightful event. This Chamber and Edison College share several common goals: to support those wishing to better their lives through education, to recognize and embrace the cultural diversity of our community, and to strengthen the regional economy

through advocacy and empowerment of business men and women.

Most importantly, we share a dream for the kind of future we want to create: a future of hope.

Many of you have personal experience with Edison College, and you've watched it grow from a small campus in Fort Myers to a multi-campus, baccalaureate degree-granting educational system serving over 17,000 credit students annually. The College is now approved to award bachelor's degrees as a State College with open door admissions.

Edison College is experiencing dramatic demographic changes in our student population. Ten years ago, 9% of our students were Hispanic. That percentage is 17% today. We give special attention to the needs of minority populations, and to those who are educationally disadvantaged. Their success is our success, and we embrace our responsibility on both an educational and social level.

In 1993, with the support of civic and community leaders, I founded Project HOPE-- "Help One Person Excel." Project HOPE offers the

promise of a college education to eighth graders who maintain good grades and finish high school. It is far more than a scholarship program. It is a positive, social and educational support network that fosters student success.

This year, 39% of HOPE Scholars are Hispanic. Nearly 1,000 HOPE scholars have graduated, some of whom have gone on to earn baccalaureate degrees. Those who wish to apply are eligible for a HOPE--to-HOPE scholarship at Florida Gulf Coast University, which provides funding for coursework, housing and books.

Our HOPE scholars serve as positive role models. This year, they adopted a class of 20 Spanish-speaking third graders from impoverished backgrounds at Orange River Elementary School. Their teacher, Maria Cardenez, is the daughter of migrant farm workers. With scholarship support, and encouragement from Edison College, she graduated with an associate's degree and transferred to FGCU, where she earned her bachelor's degree in elementary education. I have personally visited her third-grade class twice, and our HOPE Scholars distributed gifts to her students at Christmas and Easter. The

HOPE Scholars recently raised money to pay for a field trip to our Fort Myers campus. When asked if they wanted to study at Edison College one day, the third-graders unanimously raised their hands with an enthusiastic YES. This, my friends, is the definition of HOPE.

As we recognize the remarkable success of Maria and our HOPE scholars, we know there are many others who long for prosperity and equal opportunity. They face a future of limited job prospects and low income, the conditions that weaken families and communities. For them, I am proposing that the citizens of Southwest Florida agree to widen the circle of HOPE by providing any aspiring high school graduate who seeks a college education the means to do so. Only by providing an environment rich in opportunity and encouragement can we expect a better tomorrow. I believe that no student should be turned away from a college education because of inability to pay. We are already working with the Southwest Florida Community Foundation and the Alliance of Educational Leaders to develop a plan to make this happen.

Dreams inspire actions, and actions can make dreams come true.

You, as role models in our Southwest Florida community, can help our youth see the benefit of staying in school and completing a college degree. Together, we can open wide the doors of higher education in Southwest Florida.

Les doy gracias a todos por este maravilloso honor y por la oportunidad de compartir este sueño con ustedes esta noche.

Buenos noches, y Que Dios los Bendiga a todos.

I thank you for this honor and opportunity to share this dream with you tonight. Good night, and may God bless you all.