

Feel the music

BY ELAINE MARSILIO

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Esteban Velasquez feels the music.

And that connection with Mariachi music has led him to national recognition as a singer.

The Odessa High senior enjoys the lyrics and the rhythms of Mariachi, and he works hard to keep up with his Mexican heri-tage.

The 18-year-old won the 2007 Best Mariachi Vocalist in the U.S. title Saturday in San Antonio during the 13th annual Mariachi Vargas Extravaganza.

Velasquez said it's important for singers to work hard, practice and feel the music while perform-ing.

"This year, I noticed I really got into the song and expressed it more and it helped me a lot," he said.

Velasquez competed against 35 Mariachi student finalists at the event for the national title, event producer Cynthia Muñoz said

A few hours after being named, Velasquez opened for Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán, a group of international acclaim in the Mari-achi genre that started in the late 1800s.

In addition, Velasquez received a \$2,000 scholarship sponsored by Ford Motor Co. and Safeco Insur-ance, Muñoz said.

Muñoz said students — competing in categories from elementary to university levels — were judged on elements such as pitch, performance style, pronunciation and intonation.

"He was incredible," Muñoz said of Velasquez.

Velasquez received second place in the high school division for the past two years, he said, noting this year in addition to the national title he placed first in high school.

The purpose of the Mariachi event, Muñoz said, was to encour-age students to finish school and attend college.

Velasquez plans on attending college to study music following high school graduation. He hopes to become a professional Maria-chi.

In March, as part of his winnings, Velasquez will participate in an arts residency program at the John G. Shedd Institute for the Arts in Eugene, Ore.

Muñoz said the purpose of the Mariachi Vargas event is to help students further their

educational careers.

“This certainly could open the door up for so many other oppor-tunities,” Muñoz said.

Alberto Madrid, Velasquez’s Mariachi Bronco teacher, agreed saying his student has many chances to develop his talent because he’s met so many influen-tial people involved in Mariachi.

Madrid, who also teaches Mariachi at Ector Junior High, said the program at OHS is only two years old and Velasquez enhanced along with the program.

Velasquez has a great stage presence and vocal abilities, Madrid said, noting he also understands the language and how to interpret the songs.

He’s able to sing any style of Mariachi, which has influences from Spain to Africa.

“He holds true to traditional Mexican tradition,” Madrid said.

Students in Velasquez’s advanced Mariachi class said they’ve known their classmate since seventh grade and his national honor has also allowed the course and students involved some recognition.

“It’s put us on the map,” OHS senior Filiberto Gonzales, 17, said. “It’s put Odessa on the map.”

OHS senior Crystal Ruiz, 17, said over the years Velasquez has improved as a Mariachi and an individual.

“He’s more of a gentleman,” she said. “He’s grown so much.”

Velasquez said he’ll let the rhythms take him to the professional stage some day; and he knows what it takes to succeed.

“You just got to feel the song,” Velasquez said.