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FEEL THE MUSIC



MARK STERKEL/ODESSA AMERICAN

Esteban Velasquez, center, 18, a senior at Odessa High School, was recently named the Best Mariachi Vocalist in the United States at the Mariachi Vargas Extravaganza. Velasquez sings with the Odessa High School Mariachis.

OHS senior earns top Mariachi title

18-year-old Esteban Velasquez beat 35 other finalists

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

ESTEBAN VELASQUEZ
Mariachi singer

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 heritage. 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 performing. "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 Mariachi genre that started in the late 1800s. In addition, Velasquez received a \$2,000 scholarship sponsored by Ford Motor Co. and Safeco Insurance, 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

ON THE NET
>> The history of Mariachi:
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mariachi>

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 encourage 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 Mariachi. 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

>> See MARIACHI Page 8A

Gunman opens fire at mall in Nebraska

At least eight people killed, five injured; shooter kills himself

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

OMAHA, NEB. A man opened fire with a rifle at a busy department store Wednesday, killing eight people in an attack that made holiday shoppers run screaming through a mall and barricade themselves in dressing rooms.

The young shooter, who left a note predicting, "Now I'll be famous," wounded five others, two critically, then took his own life.

Witnesses said the gunman sprayed fired down on shoppers from a third-floor balcony of the Von Maur store using what police said was an SKS assault rifle they found at the scene.

"My knees rocked. I didn't know what to do, so I just ran with everybody else," said Kevin Kleine, 29, who was shopping with her 4-year-old daughter at the Westroads Mall, in a prosperous neighborhood on the city's west side. She said she hid in a dressing room with four other shoppers and an employee.

Police found the first victim on the second floor, then several more near a customer service station on the third floor.

The shooter, identified by police as 19-year-old Robert A. Hawkins, was found dead on the third floor with a self-inflicted gunshot wound, and his victims were discovered on the second and third floors.

Omaha Police Chief Thomas Warren said the shooting appeared to be random. He would not release the victims' identities and gave no motive for the attack.

>> See MALL Page 8

ON THE NET
>> Westroads Mall:
www.westroads-mall.com





Esteban Velasquez, 18, a senior at Odessa High School, hopes to become a professional Mariachi after college.

MARK STERKEL
ODESSA
AMERICAN

Mariachi

>> Continued from Page 1A

students further their educational careers.

"This certainly could open the door up for so many other opportunities," 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 influential 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.

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