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A comedian with a serious delivery

L.A. entertainer encourages Hispanic students to strive for college

By [Michael Alison Chandler](#)

Washington Post Staff Writer

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Los Angeles comedian Ernie G has a message for first-generation college-bound students in Washington.

"No matter how much education you get and how much success you achieve, if you grew up in the barrio, if you grew up in the 'hood, you will always have a little ghetto in you." The message is not meant to discourage. It's meant to show that college and ghetto can coexist.

The self-described Mexican American, Puerto Rican, Russian, French, Catholic Jew (G stands for Gritzewsky) is the spokesman for the Washington-based Hispanic College Fund. He's also a comedian who is moving from the nightclub circuit to the high school circuit so he can encourage the country's fastest-growing group of high school students to stay in school and go to college.

One in five Hispanic teens drops out of high school, according to U.S. Education Department statistics. That's about twice the rate for black students and more than three times the rate among white students. Only 12 percent of Hispanics ages 25 to 29 have a bachelor's degree or higher, compared with 31 percent of the general population, according to an analysis by the Pew Hispanic Center.

For many Latino students, barriers to college include a lack of role models, poor preparation in low-performing high schools and the rising costs of higher education. "A lot of Latino students look at the sticker price and think, if my family makes \$18-20,000 a year, I can't afford it," said Deborah Santiago, vice president of policy and research for Excelencia in Education, a Washington-based advocacy organization.

Financial barriers are even greater for the small portion of Hispanic students who are undocumented and ineligible for financial aid. As the compositions of the nation's high schools change, educators have sought out Ernie G. He's a candy-coated vitamin: He makes kids laugh while they hear an important message.

On a recent Friday, he walked onstage at Wheaton High School in Montgomery County late in the day and livened up a tired crowd with his personal story. It's a tale of growing up in Los Angeles in the 1980s, in a neighborhood dominated by street gangs that fascinated him. But he stayed away, he said, because his mother yielded a yellow Wiffle Ball bat. "I was more afraid of my mom than I was of the cholos," or gangsters, he said.

His Mexican-born mother enrolled him in St. Francis, a private school three bus rides from his home because she was not happy with the trade schools that most black and Latino kids were attending. There were only two other Latino students there. One was "Latino light," he said. He went by "John Garsha," not Juan Garcia.



Ernie G -- a Mexican American, Puerto Rican, Russian, French, Catholic Jew - speaks at Wheaton High School.

college to becoming another Latino statistic: a dropout," he said.

He did not stay out of school for long. After his favorite aunt died months later, he decided to go back to school in her honor. In 1994, he graduated from Loyola with a degree in psychology and a minor in Chicano studies.

After the show, Ivan Gomez, a 10th-grader at Wheaton, went onstage for an autograph. He said he was inspired by Ernie G's decision to go back to college.

"I feel like I'm supposed to be here. . . . I almost cried," Ivan said in halting English. He said he plans to go to college in honor of his father, who lives in El Salvador.

Ten years ago, Ernie G was a comedian trying to make it in Hollywood. He toured night clubs, did spots on game shows and made a splash on the burgeoning Latino comedy TV circuit on programs such as "Que Locos," hosted by George Lopez. His "anything for a laugh" repertoire included "hoochie" jokes and epithets and heavily accented impersonations of his abuelita, or grandmother.

Then one day in 2004, in front of an audience of business and government leaders at a National Council of La Raza conference, he was handed a microphone and given an hour to make people laugh. He was told to keep it clean. He wasn't sure he could do it. He started telling his story, about how he went to go to college. People listened -- and laughed. "I never had such an overwhelming response," he said.

After that, his career took flight. He received calls from corporate executives looking for a consultant and invitations from colleges searching for someone to inspire students. He landed a TV commercial for the community college system in California's heavily Latino Central Valley. "Nowadays, you got to go to college, especially if you want a nice ride," he says in one spot.

Soon after, he was asked to be the Hispanic College Fund spokesman. Now he speaks to some of the most talented current and prospective Latino college students in the country. He makes them laugh and tells them they can make it, even if they are the first in their families to go to college.

"People are tired of Latino comedians doing the same stereotypical comedy," he said. "They are tired of the gangsters and the gardeners and the maids and frijoles and tortillas. Yeah, we eat tortillas and beans. We are also getting educations and owning our own businesses."

PHOTOS



Ernie G (for Gritzewsky) travels across the country as the spokesman for the Hispanic College Fund. (Mark Gail/Washington Post)



Comedian Ernie G signs autographs at Wheaton High School. He graduated from Loyola Marymount in Los Angeles in 1994. (Mark Gail/Washington Post)