



Heroine Gets Just Rewards

By JOHN CEBALLOS, The Tampa Tribune

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RIVERVIEW - More than a year after helping prevent a potential school bus disaster, a Ruskin high school student's bravery was commended again.

Riverview-based Kearney Construction Co., 5115 Joanne Kearney Blvd., presented Mariela Hernandez, 15, with a \$9,800 prepaid tuition certificate Oct. 24.

'We read about her story in the newspaper a while ago and felt she was more than worthy for this award,' said Bing Kearney, chairman.

In August 2006, while Hernandez was a student at Beth Shields Middle School, she rushed to the front of the bus and slammed on the brakes after driver Theresa Dowd was knocked unconscious. The driver's side of the bus had been hit by a dairy truck and the vehicle had veered into oncoming traffic on U.S. 41.

'I didn't think about it, I just reacted,' Hernandez said.

Hernandez hit her head during the collision and received seven stitches at Manatee Memorial Hospital. Nine other students were also taken to the hospital as a precautionary measure.

For her efforts, Hernandez received several awards last year, including a plaque from Sheriff David Gee in a pep rally at Beth Shields, and Tampa Bay Lightning tickets from the Hillsborough Education Foundation.

The latest prize may have the greatest long-term benefits.

Hernandez' prepaid tuition certificate, which may be used at any Florida college or university, will grow at the same rate as tuition rates in the state.

'It's a very generous prize and we're happy for her and very grateful,' said Roberto Hernandez, who, along with his wife, Margarita, attended the presentation with their daughter. 'We have always been proud of her, so this is just something else.'

Mariela, a freshman at Lennard High School, said she hopes to become a surgeon and attend the University of South Florida.

The Kearney Foundation Scholarship was started about three years ago to provide financial assistance to students in need who go above and beyond performing well in the classroom.

'This not something that we give out every year, but it's something that's done in special circumstances,' said Bryan Kearney, Bing's brother. 'The fact that she may have saved 13 lives means that she's a special young lady.'

Reporter John Ceballos can be reached at (813) 865-1555 or jceballos@tampatrib.com.

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