

Major instills purpose for higher education

by Capt. John Ross

86th Airlift Wing Public Affairs

RAMSTEIN AIR BASE, Germany -- When Master Sgt. Matthew Ulichney of the 835th Civil Engineer Squadron walks across the stage to receive his Community College of the Air Force diploma, one seat in the house will be conspicuously empty.

Maj. Rodolfo Rodriguez, who was killed in a terrorist bombing in Pakistan Sept. 20, 2008, will not be in attendance--but Sergeant Ulichney will be feeling his presence when he moves the tassel from right to left on his graduation cap.

"He wanted me to have that," said Sergeant Ulichney. "I can still see him, in the back of my mind, saying 'Get that done.'"

In September 2007, Sergeant Ulichney went into his new supervisor's office, then-Captain Rodriguez, for a standard initial feedback--unaware his life would be headed in a new direction before the session was done.

After first going over the usual feedback form, the captain set the paper aside and said he had a different topic to discuss.

"He said, 'Sergeant U., I appreciate all the hard work you're doing, but you've got to go back to school,'" recounted Sergeant Ulichney. "He said, 'Don't worry as far as work. If it's overwhelming, I'll take it on. I want to see you taking classes this semester coming up.' I said, 'Yes sir, I will.'"

Sergeant Ulichney enrolled in a class beginning the following month, but found himself nervous about going back to school. He decided to take Spanish, because he knew he'd have plenty of help between his wife and Captain Rodriguez, both of whom were native speakers.

"After high school, I had no desire to go back to school," the sergeant said. "But after that first class I thought, 'This is not that hard.' That got the wheels turning."

Through the rest of their time working together, Captain-turned-Major Rodriguez regularly checked in with Sergeant Ulichney to discuss his progress. The master sergeant had found his academic stride by the time Major Rodriguez left the squadron to migrate over to the 86th Construction and Training Squadron.

"I think he cared about what would happen once I finished with the Air Force," said Sergeant Ulichney. "It's just the way the world operates. If you don't have a degree, forget it, you know what I mean?"

The life of Major Rodriguez was also shaped largely by education. His mother, pregnant with him at only 16 years old, crossed the border illegally from Mexico just to give birth to him in America, giving him citizenship and a chance at a better life.

"[His mother] didn't speak English, but she wanted him to go to school," said Caryn Rodriguez, his wife of eight years. "He was so quiet that he failed kindergarten."

Coming from a household that spoke only Spanish, little Rodolfo had no understanding of the language spoken in his new class. His teacher, noticing he never spoke and completely ignored everything she said, mistook him for a troublemaker and did not allow him to go on to first grade.

"Later, in college, he wrote a paper about that being one of his biggest failures, that he had to repeat kindergarten," said Mrs. Rodriguez.

Rodolfo quickly overcame the language barrier by learning English from his classmates. By the time he graduated high school in 1992, he had a 4.0 grade point average; letters in academics, track and football; and also played in the band.

Most importantly, he had a congressional recommendation to attend the U.S. Air Force Academy.

Through his 34 years, Rodolfo Rodriguez never forgot the pivotal role education played in his life. He strongly encouraged family members, friends and coworkers to improve their future by continuing with school.

Now, when Sergeant Ulichney speaks to his own troops, he finds imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.

"Even today, I finished off with 'Your CCAF,'" he said. "I told them, no matter how long you're in the military, there's no reason why you shouldn't get at least your CCAF. I mean, the military's going to pay for it."

On Christmas Eve 2008, Sergeant Ulichney learned he had graduated from CCAF with two majors: construction technology and emergency management. He'll continue in a bachelor's program starting in January, and plans to finish a master's degree before he's done.

"In April, when I walk across that stage, I'll try to get a hold of Mrs. Rodriguez. I hope she can be there," said Sergeant Ulichney. "And I can just picture him there, clapping and smiling. I think I'll always have a vision of him, just saying, 'Keep going. Don't stop--take more.'"

The Rodriguez Family Trust Fund was established to help two younger brothers and several cousins of Major Rodriguez go on to higher education. Those interested in donating can contact Service Credit Union and ask about the Rodriguez Family Trust Fund.