Latino students in Utah apply grit, determination to graduate
(part one of two)
Almost booted out of school, James stays determined about finishing while Abby works to
overcome obstacles.
By Lisa Schencker
The Salt Lake Tribune

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the statistics.

He was moody. He gave one-word answers.
James Hernandez didn’t like to read or ask for help.

But Suzie Broughton saw something in then 11-year-old James, a boy who was small for his age but strong
willed. She saw beyond the diamond-stud earring, the baggy pants and his sometimes indifferent attitude.

The two clashed at Escalante Elementary School in Salt Lake City. Broughton often separated him from other
students so he could focus. At the time, James thought she was mean.

Looking back now, James can’t believe she stuck by him. He’s amazed she continued throughout his high
school years to mentor him, to prepare him for college, to make sure his counselors put him in the right classes,
to attend his basketball games -- a sport he eventually gave up to focus on his worsening grades.

"I was a real bad kid," James said. "I put that lady through a lot of stuff."

Broughton stuck with him because she saw his potential. She saw the way other kids gravitated toward him
and listened when he spoke. She saw his persistence and believed in his desire to succeed. She thought he needed
just a little push from someone who knew her way around the school system.

"He is totally capable of finishing high school," Broughton said. "And I know he can get through college if he
can believe in himself and get his focus back in the game."

A second language » When Abby Gonzalez moved here in fourth-grade, the only English she knew was her
ABCs. When her teacher spoke, she understood only a few words.
But even as a 9-year-old, Abby wanted to make her parents proud.

The small, quiet girl stayed after class to make sure she understood the homework. At home, assignments meant to take a half hour sometimes took her four or five. Her mother helped her look through Spanish-English dictionaries after school.

By seventh-grade, Abby had pulled ahead of many of her Spanish-speaking peers.

"She knew a lot more and was really thinking about things I said in class," said Lois Bailey, Abby's seventh-grade teacher at Clayton Middle School. "She understood more than she was letting on."

Bailey decided it was time to pull Abby out of the class for students who spoke English as a second language (ESL) and put her in with regular students, children whose parents were doctors, lawyers and professors.

Abby's father worked in construction and her mother cleaned houses. Neither spoke fluent English nor had finished high school. But they were strict. No sleepovers. No boyfriends. Lots of family time.

Bailey told Abby she could always come back to her class if the regular ones proved too much. Bailey only sent about two or three ESL kids to mainstream classes each year. But not all of them made it.

**Rough senior year** » James respected Broughton and believed her when she said he could graduate from high school and go to college.

The now-tall 17-year-old with a deep, steady voice intended to make her proud, along with others who had believed in him.

He wanted to graduate from high school for his parents, who worked hard to provide for him and his three siblings. His mother, Jeanie Hernandez, a Salt Lake City native, worked full-time at a factory. His father, Leoncio Hernandez, often worked six days a week, 12 hours a day detailing cars.

Leoncio moved out of the house when James was 13 but drove James to school. He and James didn't talk much about school, but still, he wanted to see his son graduate. He knew how hard it could be to go through life without an education. He quit school as a sixth-grader in Mexico to help provide for his nine siblings after his own father died.

"If you don't have a diploma, you can only get jobs like I do," Leoncio said. "I don't want to see my kids working as dishwashers or working in landscaping."

Above all, James wanted to graduate for himself.

"It's basically everything I've worked for," he said in October while attending West High, his home school.

But by December, old habits set in. James often felt apathetic. He still didn't like to read and had trouble paying attention in math. He would do anything for teachers who he believed cared about him and anything to avoid those who he felt didn't. James and his friends often ditched class.

He sometimes had trouble seeing his future; it was easier to think only about today.

"I don't want to set all these goals," James said. "I just like to take one day at a time."

Before winter break, a West High administrator told James he had missed too many classes. It was time to try a different school, maybe an alternative one, such as Horizonte where James could get more attention. But James wanted to graduate with his childhood friends. He signed a contract promising no unexcused absences for a semester and no more than two tardies in exchange for being allowed to remain at West. He saw it as a challenge.

"He made it sound like I couldn't do it," he said, showing the same type of fire Broughton saw in him in sixth grade. "That kind of made me mad, so I came back to show I could do it. I knew I could do it."

James left for winter break with the one-page contract in hand and a renewed sense of determination.

**Sheer determination** » Abby never returned to ESL classes. Earning grades that ranged from A to F, she sometimes struggled in school. Tests were especially difficult. She was fluent in English by high school, but she continued to think in both languages.
When she took the ACT, she had to translate the English questions into Spanish in her head and then translate the answers back to English for the test. She scored a 15 out of 36. But the now 18-year-old, quiet and quick to smile, tried her best at East High School. She translated for Spanish-speaking students, did her homework and went to class. She went to church on Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays where, as a Jehovah's Witness, she learned about the importance of spreading God's word partly by setting a good example.

She worked 20 to 30 hours a week after school as a nanny, a job she enjoyed and appreciated. She used her earnings to buy herself a used car, save for college and occasionally help her parents pay bills when her father's construction jobs started drying up.

Still, she made school a priority. As a junior, Abby went to the city library on weekends to type her school papers on the public computers, which had a time limit. When her time was up, she would leave the computer and wait until the next person's time was over or find a different computer so she could resume her homework.

Eventually, she decided to buy a word processor for her family's home computer with money she earned at work. It never occurred to Abby to ask her parents to buy the program for her.

"I know it's hard for them," Abby said. "If I know they don't have enough money, I shouldn't be asking for stuff."

But she wanted to succeed. She wanted to graduate. And she wanted to go to college. She wanted to become a teacher like Bailey, her seventh-grader teacher whom she still turned to for advice even in high school.

"I think of my family. I'll be the first to graduate from high school," Abby said, trying not to sound too proud.

But Abby knew she would have to essentially go it alone, hoping for help from teachers and counselors along the way.

Her parents wanted to see her graduate but didn't know exactly how to guide her to a diploma. They didn't know what classes she needed to take, what forms to fill out or how to help her with her homework.

"It's my oldest daughter," Abby's mother, Abigail Gonzalez, said in Spanish. She had also once dreamed of becoming a teacher, but her own education in Mexico didn't go beyond middle school. "I don't know what to do."
When Richard Gomez was young, his father discouraged him from going to college.  
"My dad was saying, 'No, you're the oldest of eight. You need to graduate and go to work,'" Gomez said. 
But Gomez, now coordinator for educational equity at the State Office of Education, went to college anyway after a counselor told him he was "college material."

It's the type of encouragement Gomez said is essential to keeping Latino students -- who might not otherwise envision the same futures as their white peers -- in school. Experts say a number of systemic and personal challenges keep many Latino students from graduating.

Some face economic pressures such as having to work -- or wanting to drop out of school -- to help support their families. Others struggle to fulfill high school requirements in a language they're still learning. Some students who are in the U.S. illegally --- about 7 percent of Latinos younger than 18 --- see no point in finishing school, knowing it will be difficult to secure scholarships and professional jobs, experts say. Others have parents who didn't graduate and can't prepare them for college the same way other parents might, said Patricia Dark of the Utah Hispanic Chamber of Commerce.

Still, Latino students as a group are diverse, yet they sometimes are tracked into lower-level classes based on the assumption they all struggle academically, Gomez said.

"A lot of policies, practices and structures in place, some written and some not, have the overall effect of sending a clear message to kids of color that they're really not valued in our high schools," said Michael Wotorson of the Campaign for High School Equity, a Washington, D.C.-based coalition.

For example, Latino students comprised about 8 percent of Utah's Class of 2008, but made up only 5 percent of those who took Advanced Placement exams. East High junior Margarita Rodriguez said she was the only person of color in one of her honors classes.

"You felt uncomfortable like you didn't belong," she said. "People just don't think you can do as much."

Gomez said placing Latino students into lower-level classes is the type of inadvertent practice that makes some feel schools don't value them. Students who don't feel valued are more likely to drop out, said Theresa Martinez, assistant vice president for academic outreach at the University of Utah. "If they knew that ahead of them was a six-figure salary and they would be treated fairly, they would keep going to school," Martinez said. "But they don't see that."
Graduation grind: Pressure mounts as ceremony nears for Abby and James (part two of two)

Challenges » Her friends are warned about lacking credits, but Abby remains determined. James struggles to keep his focus.

By Lisa Schencker
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Abby Gonzalez, 18, sat with five friends in the East High School cafeteria about a month before graduation. The six girls, all Latinas, picked at their lunches, alternating between Spanish and English as they chatted. They talked about teachers, ditching class and getting caught.

Abby kept quiet.

One of her friends took a paper from her backpack to show the group. The girl laughed at the thought of bringing it home to her parents. She let the others pass it around the table. Another girl pulled the same paper from her bag. She, too, laughed at her misfortune.

"Your student is not on track to graduate on June 10, 2009 for the following reasons," the papers said. Each girl's form included a list of missing credits.

The girls lamented the reasons for their downfall -- a hard class, a mean teacher, confusing course work.

Abby still said nothing.

She had fought long and hard to make it this far. Her grades ranged from A to F. She struggled taking tests in English, a language she learned in fourth grade when she moved to Salt Lake City. Abby spent all her free time attending church and working to earn money, which she saved for college and occasionally put toward groceries for her family.

But unlike many of her friends, she didn't skip classes. Her friends had all but stopped asking her to ditch with them.

They knew what her answer would be every time.
"I'll just give them a look," Abby said.

Promises » James Hernandez, 17, meant it when he said he'd live up to the promises he made in a contract with officials at West High School.

In the contract, James, a tall senior, promised not to miss any classes for a semester and not to collect more than two tardies in exchange for being allowed to remain at West. He thought it would be the motivation he needed to stop skipping class.

He signed the contract in December.

By February, he no longer attended the school.

"It was just kind of like, a couple of classes. It was just kind of occasionally," James said of skipping class after signing the contract. "If you're five minutes late, you get marked absent. There's really no point in going to class if you're 10 minutes late."

For a few days after leaving West, James was in limbo. He was having a hard time enrolling at another school because of confusion over an outstanding fee at West.

For a brief moment, he wasn't sure he wanted to keep trying. His mother, Jeanie Hernandez, who graduated from West 22 years earlier, told James he either had to graduate or get a job.

"I just got kicked out of school," he thought. "There's no point in going back."

But the thought flashed in his head for only a minute.

He wanted his diploma. He wanted to show everyone he could do it. He'd seen his father, who'd quit school in sixth grade in Mexico, work endless hours in menial jobs. He wanted something better.

"I went to school for 12 years," he said. "I don't want that all to be for nothing."

About a week after leaving West, he enrolled at East High.

Though the clock was ticking toward graduation, he saw it as a new beginning.

His childhood friends wouldn't be there to distract him. This time there was no contract. The principal of East told James he simply had to do the right thing.

James liked that.

Greatest motivation » On a day in April, Abby skipped her lunch break.

Instead, she quickly walked after second period to the school counselors' offices, a place she visited often. She knocked on the door of Kassy Keen, the school's college access adviser.

Abby had asked Keen to review two essays she had written in hopes of winning a $500 college scholarship. One essay asked Abby to describe her greatest motivation for going to college. The other asked her to describe her financial need.

"Before the economic downturn, my father had a well-paying, steady job, so he decided to buy new windows for the house and a truck for the family," Abby wrote. "Now everything seems wrong, and they can barely make payments for the house, bills and truck."

"I have to admit that sometimes I want to quit everything, and try to find a way to help them. However, I realize that the only way for me to help them is by continuing with my education."

Her motivation for going to college, she wrote, was her parents, neither of whom graduated from high school. Keen reassured Abby that her essays, especially her content, were good. Abby was fluent in English but still worried about her writing skills.

"Don't be nervous about your writing," Keen said. "You come across as very genuine and sincere in your writing."

The essays had to be postmarked by the next day.

That evening, after work, Abby sat at the family computer perfecting them.
Big day nears » On a day shortly before graduation, James sat in his first period class at 7:50 a.m., his head resting on the palm of his hand.

James struggled to stay awake as classmates took turns reading from Lord of the Flies. He never liked reading. The closest he ever came to enjoying it was in sixth grade when his teacher, Suzie Broughton, taught him strategies and chose books for him she thought he'd like.

She had always said he had potential; it was just a matter of focus.

But now, it was too early in the morning for James. His English teacher, Nancy Peterson, tried to keep her class lively.

"When's the last day of school?" she asked the class of seniors. "Oh my gosh, are you guys so excited?"

James didn't smile. He wasn't excited for graduation.

At that point, the only graduation event James knew for sure he'd attend, was his sixth-grade class reunion.

Broughton had kept in touch with James and mentored him through the years. She had kept tabs on him despite the leave-me-alone attitude he'd thrown at her as an 11-year-old, an attitude that still occasionally seeped through his normally calm, confident exterior. She saw his sincerity, his determination and his natural leadership abilities.

He wasn't the type of kid who sought friends; he attracted them.

It was a quality that worked for and against him as he plodded toward graduation.

James had thought that by switching to East, he wouldn't have to worry about friends tempting him away from class. But, as always, other students were drawn to his cool confidence.

At lunchtime, he met his new group of friends, mostly Latino boys, with hand slaps and fist bumps at the bannister overlooking the East High cafeteria.

Other Latino kids and black kids sat on the left side of the cafeteria below them. The white kids sat on the right. A group of Polynesian kids stood by the bathroom.

"You're more comfortable hanging out with kids who know what you're talking about," James guessed. A white kid from the affluent Avenues neighborhood might not understand him, he thought.

Ten minutes into the 30-minute lunch break, one of James' friends suggested the group drive to Wendy's in Sugar House to get some chicken nuggets. James thought, "Why not?"

"I go where life takes me," James joked as he left.

He skipped his last period of the day.

Roses and a diploma » Abby was running late. Vehicles jammed the roads leading to the Huntsman Center.

But about 15 minutes before the ceremony was to start, her family found a parking spot. Abby rushed into the tunnel underneath the basketball stadium, her white gown billowing around her, her hair newly highlighted and curled at the ends.

Her father, younger sister, uncle and mother -- holding a bouquet of pink roses -- hurried to find seats in the stadium. Abby's father, Ruben Gonzalez, darted to a single, open seat closer to the action, camera in hand.

Abby's parents watched patiently as a line of speakers rose to the podium to speak of victory, triumph and change. They quoted Thomas Jefferson, William Shakespeare and George Orwell.

The Gonzalezes sat quietly, letting the alien words float past them. Only Abby's younger sister Jennifer Gonzalez, 12, understood.

Finally, school officials began reading names.

Some families shouted and waved signs. Polynesian families, in huge groups, screamed and threw confetti in the air.

Abby's mother remained calm as her daughter approached the stage. Quietly, she handed the bouquet to her husband, who rushed down 25 rows of seats to the front row, where Abby stood waiting her turn.

He couldn't wait one more minute to congratulate his daughter, the first person in the family to graduate from high school and go on to college. Abby would start at Salt Lake Community College in the fall. She had been accepted into the University of Utah, but the family could not afford it.

Abby's father handed her the bouquet of pink roses before she even approached the stage. Smiling nervously, she accepted the bouquet and proceeded toward her diploma.

"Abigail Gonzalez."

The sound of her name traveled across the arena.

She crossed the stage with the roses in her hand.

Staying hopeful » Nine days before high school graduation, James sat in a circle in one of the unlikeliest of places -- his elementary school gym -- for a sixth-grade class reunion. Clusters of shiny "Congrats Grad!" balloons dotted the sparse room.

His former teacher, Broughton, posed a question to the group: "What is something that you have accomplished since leaving sixth-grade?" James spoke in turn.

"I am going to graduate from high school," James said in a clear, commanding voice. "I don't think anybody who knew me back in sixth grade would have ever believed that I would graduate. But I made it."

James' former classmates and Broughton cheered.

Technically, James' knew he hadn't made it. But he hadn't told a lie, he told himself. He was close to graduating, only a few credits shy.

He'd graduate eventually, just not with his class, he thought.

Nine days later, as his classmates threw their caps into the air, James played basketball with friends -- pickup games. He thought about going to the graduation ceremony, to see his friends walk, but decided against it.

"It was too hard," James said. "I was supposed to be up there graduating."

After graduation, James hung out with his friends. He filled out job applications. One employer called him to schedule an interview, but James missed it when he couldn't find a ride.

About two weeks after classes ended, he signed up for summer school, determined to finish his remaining credits.

This time, he'd work at his own pace, he thought. This time, he was serious. This time would be different.

He hoped.

James Hernandez

Age: 18
Family: Lives with mother, older sister and two younger brothers. His father also lives in Salt Lake City but is separated from his mother.
Language spoken: English only. James does not speak Spanish.
Aspirations: James wants to become a policeman.

Abby Gonzalez

Age: 18
Family: Lives with mother, father and 12-year-old sister.
Language spoken: English and Spanish.
Aspirations: Abby wants to become a teacher or go into criminal justice.