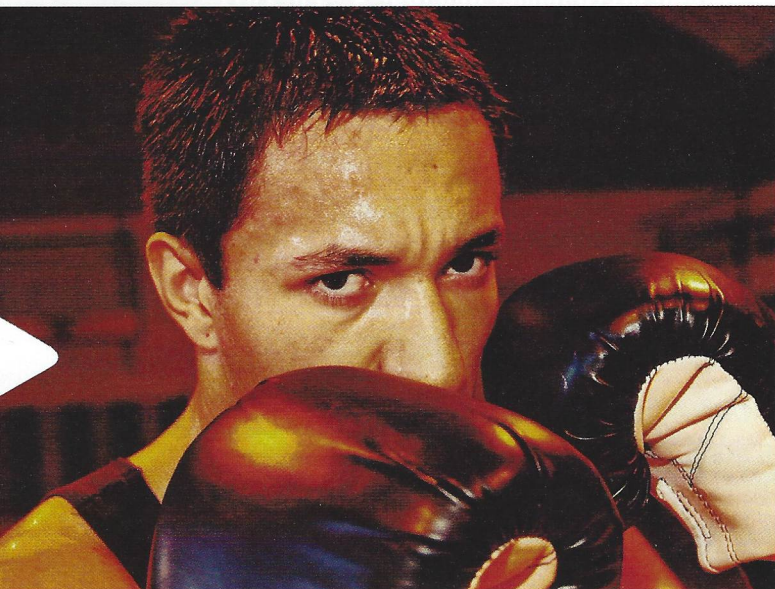


BY REBECCA SVEC
PHOTOS BY ALLAN RECALDE

Coach's phone call makes college an option for El Paso student

No Longer Boxed In



GO TO COLLEGE? RYAN RODRIGUEZ? No one talked about college, least of all Ryan. Successful people go to college, he thought. Not some kid from central El Paso, who could see gangs and crime from his window. He felt lucky to graduate high school; to make enough tackles to be an all-state linebacker in Texas.

The phone rang in his apartment the spring of his senior year. Doane assistant football coach Chris Bessler was talking to him about a college 18 hours away. Bessler told him Doane was a great place to get an education and play football. "That phone call changed my life," Ryan Rodriguez. Going to college.

Doane coaches picked him up at the airport, moved him in, introduced him to other players, helped ease the culture shock. One of the first things he did was find a place to box,

waking at 4 a.m. to train in Lincoln and make it back for 8 a.m. classes. He needed boxing. "It gives me a taste of home."

He was seven when a bully gave him a swollen lip and took his school supplies, a big purchase for his family of six. His dad, Luis, took Ryan straight to the boxing gym. That was his dad's way, pushing him toward athletics, pulling him away from the streets, teaching him to take care of himself.

"Have you seen the movie 'Freedom Writers?'" Ryan '11 asks. It gives a sense of certain aspects of his high school. El Paso is a place of remarkable history and desert beauty, but his neighborhood was about grit and poverty, gangs and crime. It didn't leave Ryan untouched. He was on a bad path for a while. His dad pulled him back. Ryan found success and the path to college in football.

At Doane, he played football one year, and joined the Sigma Phi Theta fraternity. He grew to love this place where people trusted each other. "Where I grew up, there's always a wall up." Ryan wants to work with high-school kids in urban areas. He'll teach them social sciences, but he's just as interested in taking down their walls, showing them how to trust. "Every kid is a good kid. They just need a little bit of guidance... I feel like I could be a good role model."

Dr. Linda Kalbach, his adviser and assistant professor of education at Doane, agrees. "Ryan wants to make sure every student gets the opportunity to hear messages of affirmation and to cultivate their mind. Sometimes kids need someone who has not always received that message." ▲

