Photo: Tony Stout (retired Master Gunnery Sergeant), left, is proud that the combat veteran Sergeant Simon Gonzalez, U.S. Marine Corps, right, who began as one of only six boys when they established Troop 619 will soon be promoted to Staff Sergeant.

Children who grow up in the Migrant Housing Centers face unique challenges that are often unknown to those who don’t share the experience. Parents or guardians who may have limited English skills, cultural traditions that may discourage contact outside the family, a lack of access to personal enrichment opportunities, and the idea that college is beyond their reach are all issues that can be a part of life within this community.

According to local historians, the shift to migrant workers in agriculture in this area roughly began in the 1950s. Several parts of the country also saw a significant increase in migrant workers and the frequent moves of families combined with other factors ultimately led to establishment of the Migrant Education Program (MEP) authorized under Part C of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965.

According to the Miami-Dade Public School System website, the Title I Migrant Education Program provides supplemental instructional and support services to eligible children of migrant workers through selected components such as Migrant Early Childhood Learning Program (MECLP) and the Extended School Day Program (ESP).

After Tony Stout retired from a career in the U.S. Marines, he entered into the Migrant Education Program in 1996 where he quickly determined that in addition to his regular work, the Boy Scouts could be a valuable tool to use.

Simon Gonzalez was among the six boys that stepped forward to join the new Troop 619. Although Stout saw that Gonzalez possessed a surprising level of maturity for a fifth grader, he did not know then how strong the mentor-protégé relationship would grow between them.

Gonzalez’s parents had immigrated from Venezuela in 1992, arriving in Homestead only months before Hurricane Andrew. The devastation and lack of work sent them to Miami for a few years before they returned. Whether it was coincidence or fate that brought them to the Royal Caribbean Migrant Camp where Stout was,
joining the Scouts was to be a turning point for nine-year-old Gonzalez.

“School and Scouts were my world,” Gonzalez said as he remembered those years. Indeed, Gonzalez steadily rose through the ranks to Eagle Scout as he earned 110 Merit Badges. Tragedy struck at age fourteen though when his mother was murdered, a trauma that could have spun him into hopelessness. He shouldered his grief wanting to protect his younger sister from the harshness of the world around them. He also strengthened his intent to prove that where an individual begins in life does not have to dictate his future. It was only natural that he would turn to the U.S. Marine Corps to emulate his mentor, Stout.

It was a proud day for Gonzalez when he not only completed his Marine Corps training in 2006, but also received his U.S. citizenship through the fast-track program. The new Scout Observer deployed twice to Iraq and was the Fire Control Team Chief on a tour to Afghanistan when he was notified that the Marines had selected him to be a recruiter.

While he was reluctant to leave the field, he recognized the opportunity to positively influence boys and girls in middle and high school, and Gonzalez specifically requested to be assigned to this area. With his office in Cutler Bay, South Dade Senior High, where he graduated from, is part of his region.

Gonzalez repeats his central message as often as he can. “It’s not about the clothes you wear – it’s about character and what you contribute to society, how you’re going to impact the future. I’ve taken on the leadership roles that I have to show that you can do that no matter where you start from.”

For Stout, he sees Gonzalez and many other scouts that are now adults continue to be actively involved with Boy Scout Troop 619. And while the second-generation troop has grown to more than 400 members, there are other programs that also provide inspiration for careers they can pursue.

“So many of the youngsters and teens want to have a better life, but they don’t know where to start,” Stout said. “That’s why Simon serves as such a good role model. He came from exactly where they are and genuinely knows the challenges they face and the choices they can make.”

In June, Gonzalez is schedule to be promoted to Staff Sergeant.

By Charlie Hudson

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