Celebrating Cultures, Serving Others

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MOVING FROM CHICAGO’S SOUTH SIDE TO AMES, IOWA WAS A CULTURE SHOCK FOR BRIAN CASTRO.

“I could hear myself breathe,” says Castro, a sophomore with a double major in animal science and global resource systems.

In Chicago, the third largest city in the nation, traffic, people and noise are a constant. Castro says it took a while to get used to the open horizons and acres of corn.

Immersing himself into new situations isn’t something new for Castro. He’s a first generation American and his first language is Spanish. His parents moved from Mexico to pursue the American dream in Chicago before he was born. Castro says he often surprises others when he answers his cell phone and speaks fluent Spanish.

“When people first meet me—they hardly notice that I have an accent,” Castro says. “Then my phone rings and I speak Spanish a hundred-miles a minute.”

In Chicago, Castro attended the Chicago High School of Agriculture. The high school attracted Castro because of his interest in animals. That interest and the guidance of Aurelio Curbelo, the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences multicultural coordinator, brought him to Iowa State.

“We kept in contact all four years and he kept me informed about opportunities at Iowa State,” Castro says.

In high school, he was an avid fan of the FFA. He says the FFA taught him valuable leadership and communication skills. During his senior year he served as president of the FFA chapter, which is the largest in Illinois and the fourth largest in the United States.

Being involved is important, Castro says, and he leads by example. Castro is the president of the Iowa State chapter of the Minorities in Agriculture and Natural Resources and Related Sciences (MANRRS). In October, he helped organize a welcome breakfast for the largest ag career fair in the nation.

Castro also serves as the treasurer for the Latino Heritage Committee. The group celebrated Latino Heritage month in September with a parade of flags, dances, dinners and a fiesta.

“We like to show people what our heritage is about, so we host events to celebrate our Latin background,” Castro says.

From picking up cans at tailgates for charity to cleaning up the Skunk River, service and involvement top Castro’s list. He’s a pledge with the Phi Kappa Psi fraternity because of its extensive philanthropic goals, including helping with events to raise funds for the Girl’s and Boy’s Club in Ames.

Last summer, Castro took another cultural plunge and joined a group of his peers in Uganda as part of the ISU-Makerere University Uganda Service Learning Program. He says the experience broadened his understanding about the problems related to nutrition throughout the world.

“Now, I want to focus my studies on international nutrition,” Castro says, “especially protein deficiency in children.”