

JOSE ANTONIO GUTIERREZ
He was an American hero, now he's an American

BY BRENDAN MINITER

The Wall Street Journal

Friday, April 4, 2003

One of the first U.S. soldiers to die in Iraq was not an American citizen. He'd come here illegally as a teenager. His name was José Antonio Gutierrez. He was killed on March 21 by enemy fire while trying to secure Umm Qasr, a port vital for humanitarian aid. He was a 22-year-old lance corporal in the U.S. Marine Corps.

It's easy to discount talk of the American dream as hyperbole, a cliché carelessly tossed about. But then there are people like Gutierrez, whose whole life proved that the naysayers were wrong. It is possible to escape the oppression of your circumstances. It's no coincidence that he joined the Marines, whose motto is "semper fidelis." Gutierrez remained always faithful to the dream that inspires the best within us. And for this he is an American hero.

Gutierrez was born in Guatemala, but he told his American foster family only an outline of his life there. It's easy to see the pain in the omitted text. His mother died when he was three. Five years later his father was dead. He left school to work a series of odd jobs to buy food for himself and his sister, Engracia. He learned about the U.S. from an American aid worker at a shelter.

Then "the mentor left," explains Lillian Cardenas--one of his foster sisters--so Gutierrez decided to head for America by stowing away on freight trains. He got stuck in Mexico for a couple of years, crossing into California when he was 14. He was determined to see Los Angeles. Somehow he ended up in Hollywood.

He slept on park benches and got food from a shelter. An alert social worker enrolled him in a program that helped him gain legal residency and placed him with a foster family. The first placement didn't work out. Neither did the second or the third. Finally in 2000, he came to live with Nora and Marcelo Mosquera (themselves immigrants from Costa Rica and Ecuador).

The Mosqueras have three "biological" children, but have cared for more than two dozen foster children over the years, some of whom they've adopted. They never adopted Gutierrez, but on Mother's Day last year he wrote home and "formally" asked if he could call them mom and dad.

He never forgot Engracia, often calling or sending her money. But he reached new heights with the Mosqueras. They pressured him to learn English (in frustration he'd say he just wanted to learn enough "to get by"). He had a strong faith in God and would urge his siblings to go to church--they were all Catholic. He was a private person, but would

jokingly tell the family that someday "people will know my name." After high school he was recruited to play soccer for nearby Harbor College. There he began studying architecture.

Gutierrez loved America and talked about giving something back by enlisting in the Army. A few months after Sept. 11, he surprised everyone by announcing he'd joined the Marines. The Army recruiter just wasn't as convincing, he told them. After he graduated from Parris Island in March 2002, the Marines became another family for him.

"You always had to take the big car when you picked up José," Mrs. Cardenas recalls. "I have a little Acura, and once drove it the 90 minutes to Camp Pendleton to pick him up," she said chuckling. He was waiting there with five buddies. "Honestly, I have to tell you that you're not all going to fit." Sometimes he'd show up for dinner with as many as 30 Marines. "There were Marines everywhere," she said, but they were all welcome. "Whenever you'd have him around, you didn't have a worry in the world."

He knew the danger that awaited him in the Gulf. Before leaving, he asked his foster family to take care of Engracia. "You're her family now," he said. But Mrs. Cardenas also remembers why he was willing to go to war. "From what I've seen," Saddam has to be confronted, he told them. "It's my job. It's also my duty."

Gutierrez, along with José Angel Garibay--a Marine killed on March 23 battling for Nasiriyah--has now been awarded citizenship posthumously.