

## Sebastian Velazquez, *Neel/Voigt Diversity Scholar*



Sebastian Velazquez was a junior in high school when Hurricane Harvey ravaged his family home in Houston, TX, USA in August 2017. Two days before the hurricane hit, Sebastian and his family evacuated to a hotel in Dallas, where they were allowed to stay at a discounted rate with proof of address.

“There’s an elevation problem with my house. It’s street level and it [slopes] downward,” Sebastian tells *ITE Journal*. While surrounding houses were given city approval to elevate the structures, his family was not granted permission to raise theirs. “So basically when it rains the water drains into our house,” he says. While the family home has flooded about 30 times,

Hurricane Harvey brought untold damage to the structure, Sebastian notes. The house sat for 2 weeks while it was still unsafe for his family to return, creating mold issues in the walls.

Sebastian’s father Jorge, a construction worker, had already missed two weeks of work due to Harvey. The house desperately needed attention, so when Jorge’s job called to say he needed to report to work or face the consequences, Sebastian knew he had to step up. “I was the one who had to do something about it,” he says.

Sebastian, a stellar student with a 3.5 GPA and an AP class-load, had to miss school in order to rebuild his family home. He and his family—including his two sisters and his parents—had taken refuge in a friend’s RV for about a month during the reconstruction process. After a few days of being out, he received a letter from his school—who was unaware of his family’s situation—warning him about his absenteeism. Once Sebastian explained what had happened to his home, faculty at the school, YES Prep Southeast, began helping out. “The school administrator came to my house to approve my absences,” he says. “They helped with the house as well. They gave me furniture, they gave me clothes, they helped me break down some of the house.”

While catching up at school was hard in the midst of reconstructing his home. Sebastian’s teachers arranged to come to him for tutoring sessions. Once he was back in the classroom, “I stayed a lot after school” catching up on coursework, he says.

Two years later, Sebastian ended up graduating on time with his 3.5 GPA. He is set to attend Texas A&M Kingsville in the fall. His interest in civil engineering is derived not just from the spirit of helping others, which drove him to rebuild his family’s home, but also from helping his father with construction since he was little. “It was during my freshman year when we were starting to learn about any professions we wanted to do,” he notes. “I told my counselor, ‘I want to do something that has to do with construction because that’s something my dad and I have been doing since I was nine.’”

Sebastian says he is interested in all facets of civil engineering—buildings, bridges, transportation systems, and generating new ideas. “I like helping people, I like collaborating,” he says.

When Sebastian learned he was named the second ITE Diversity Scholar, he was overjoyed, as were his parents, who cried upon learning the news.

“The organization believes in me, which excites me and gives me a way to believe in myself—that I can do it,” he says. “This \$20,000 will help me and help my family as a whole to let me pursue my education. As soon as I get my degree I will help the organization that helped me in any way as well.” **itej**

## ITE Legacy Fund Makes it Happen

The funding for this year’s scholar was to be provided through the ITE Legacy Fund, which an average of 150 people contribute to yearly. However, through the generosity of Diversity Scholars Committee members Hibbett Neel, P.E. (H) and Ken Voigt, P.E. (H), ITE had the privilege of naming not one, but two Diversity Scholars, the second of whom will be supported in part by Neel and Voigt’s personal contributions.



Sebastian with his father Jorge at the ITE Annual Meeting in Austin.



Sebastian poses with friends after graduating high school.