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From farm work to homework: First generation graduate walks this fall

DECEMBER 4, 2017

Born into a family of migrant workers, Scott Castro considered education a luxury beyond his reach. But this December, the senior accounting major will achieve a dream he once thought was impossible.

Castro's parents and his nine siblings never completed high school. Moving homes constantly to work the seasonal crops was the only life he and his family had ever known.

But Castro was determined. Early in the morning, while kids his age were sleeping, Castro was up and working in chicken houses in Tattnall County, Georgia, before heading to school. In the afternoons, he'd help his family in the fields, then squeeze in homework and studying before a brief night's sleep.

One day, however, an unforeseen opportunity changed his perspective forever.

He was working with a farmer who was struggling to keep up with payroll for his labor contract. Castro, who had recently taken a computer class in high school and was eager to put his newly acquired skills to the test, offered to take a look at the program. After a bit of maneuvering, Castro was able to create a system for the farmer. He didn't imagine much in return.

When the farmer paid him for his work, Castro was taken aback.

"I thought 'wow,'" he said. "I was just working on my hands and knees in the dirt and the rocks. I was able to make more money doing this *inside* than all week in the fields. This is a real skill."

At that moment, Castro saw firsthand the difference an education could make, and the edge it would give him in the workforce. He decided to apply to Georgia Southern, with hopes of breaking the work cycle in his family.

"When I was in high school, the main reason I was able to graduate was because of my teachers," he said. "I needed a chance to get to know my professors because I knew they'd be the ones to help push me along and keep me going. Georgia Southern's smaller class sizes fit that description, and I said, 'I have to go there.'"

It wasn't until he got his acceptance letter to the University that he really felt as though his dream was attainable.

"My family was shocked," he said. "They were surprised when I graduated high school. They feared I'd fall into the same pattern and drop out. They don't really understand what I'm doing, what I'm working for, or what I'm trying to do for all of us. But they're happy for me."



The support of his family was important, but Castro recognized the need for encouragement from others who were already living out his goals. He found a home in the College of Business and sought the advice of his finance professor, John Hatem, Ph.D., who quickly became Castro's mentor at the University.

Castro was determined to be that mentor for other students like him. As a volunteer for the [Migrant Education Program](#), a program that advocates for and gives advice to students from similar backgrounds, Castro actively seeks to help others graduate and fulfill their own dreams at Georgia Southern.

"What inspired me before was just to see if I could do it for my family and myself. I wanted to get us out of what I'd seen my whole life," he said. "But now, I can see the light at the end of the tunnel. What inspires me now is helping other students who come from a similar background do the same.

Now Castro has a new dream- to finish his education at Georgia Southern. He is on track to graduate in December (*magna cum laude*) with a Bachelor of Business Administration in accounting before starting his master's in accounting at the University in the spring. Later, he plans to earn a doctoral degree in accounting and eventually become a professor. The boy who once never dreamed of going to college is now a man who's aiming for a degree only a fraction of the population ever seek to obtain.

"The opportunities we have in this country, and here at Georgia Southern, we can't let those go to waste," said Castro. "We have the ability to really change our lives."

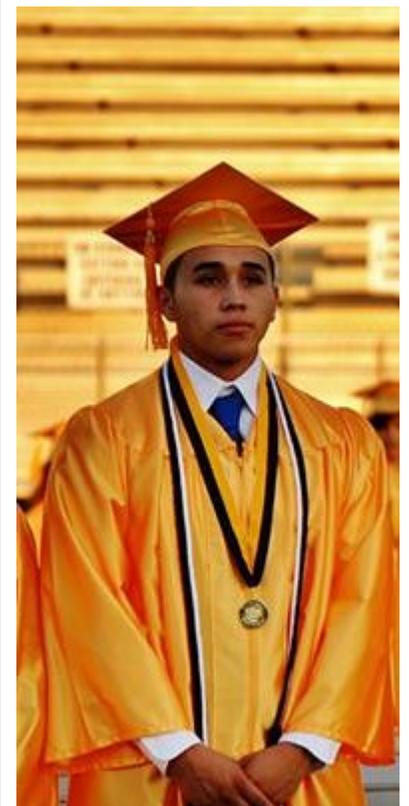
About the College of Business

The Georgia Southern University College of Business is one of eight colleges at the University and accredited through AACSB-International. The College offers four graduate degree programs, nine undergraduate degrees and 10 certificate programs. The College of Business is known for producing career-ready professionals, utilizing theoretical and practical knowledge, through an engaging learning environment, research and service.

Visit GeorgiaSouthern.edu/business.

About Georgia Southern University

Georgia Southern University, a public Carnegie Doctoral/Research University founded in 1906, offers 118 degree programs serving 20,418 students. Through eight colleges, the University offers bachelor's, master's and doctoral degree programs built on more than a century of academic achievement. Georgia Southern is recognized for its student-centered and hands-on approach to education. Visit GeorgiaSouthern.edu.



Scott Castro was the first in his family to graduate high school. He graduated from Tattnall County High School with honors.

Student turned journalist: Senior Harley Strickland to start work with WTOC this spring

DECEMBER 4, 2017



Harley Strickland is certainly leaving a legacy for herself at Georgia Southern. The senior journalism major was crowned Miss Georgia Southern in 2016, represented the University in the Savannah St. Patrick's Day parade, and currently broadcasts weekly Facebook live-streams with the University multimedia journalism class. So it may come as quite a surprise that prior to her academic career, Strickland said she was once a timid little girl from Claxton, Georgia.

"My granny and I would always watch her soaps, and the news would come on just before," said Strickland. "I always admired watching the reporters and wished I could do that, but I knew I was too shy."

It wasn't until her sophomore year of high school that Strickland found her connection to the camera. Her media teacher at Pinewood Christian Academy dug up an old teleprompter for the classroom and was looking for a group of students to utilize it for a school news show. Strickland became curious, and decided to give her dream of reporting a shot within the comfort of her small class walls.

She soon began co-hosting the school news show, and her showmanship began to grow. She began competing in pageants at the local level, raking in titles and scholarship money for her interview and communication skills. She slowly branched out of her comfort zone and became determined to follow her dreams, despite her reserved nature.

After high school Strickland began courses at East Georgia State College, and continued competing in pageants, which helped hone her skills on stage and in front of the camera. But she knew she needed more hands-on experience if she were to reach her goals of reporting in the "real world."

She transferred to Georgia Southern in the fall of 2015 and declared a journalism major. She joined the University's student media group and worked with their video component, "The Circle." Everything was going perfectly for the budding star reporter until her world came to a halt in 2016.

Her father was diagnosed with cancer and given a few months to live. Strickland was overwhelmed with grief, and the added worry of classwork and looming projects left her feeling helpless. She decided to confide in the University's Dean of Students, Patrice Jackson, Ph.D., to share her situation.

"Dean Jackson was amazing," said Strickland. "She really listened and cared about my situation. She told me not to worry about my classes, that people would work with me. It was so genuine, and it made a terrible situation into one of my fondest memories at Georgia Southern. It's when I realized the true close-knit community we have."

University faculty and staff showed up for her father's viewing, and many talked with her personally to show support and kindness.

"People just really take the time here," she said.

The outpour of love Strickland felt from her community and Georgia Southern family kept her pushing toward her goals. She pressed on in her academics and eventually landed an internship with Savannah news station WTOC.

Strickland spent her final summer in college getting hands-on experience in the newsroom under the tutelage of University alumna WTOC Bureau Chief Dal Cannady. Since completing her internship at WTOC, Strickland was hired to host the channel's annual Holiday Gift Guide, and will also begin a full-time position as an assistant news specialist after graduation.

She credits much of her academic and career success to her time at Georgia Southern.

"If it weren't for this University, for the amazing faculty and staff who took the time to give me personal feedback and criticism, I would never have been able to do this," she said. "Dr. Dean Cummings [Ph.D., assistant professor of multimedia film and production] and Dr. Jennifer Kowalewski [Ph.D., associate professor of multimedia journalism], especially, made time to make sure I had the skills to be successful. I'm so grateful for that."

Strickland was recently inducted into the University's chapter of the National Honors Society of Leadership and Success and is set to graduate *magna cum laude* in December.

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