Derek Parra

Life Influences

“When I started going to roller rinks, I met new people that once again came from different walks of life. And what I started doing as a young child for some reason--I don’t know how this happened--but I started looking at other people who were successful, whether it was kids who were good at sports or good in school or whatever. I guess [I looked at] people like them. I always . . . [asked myself.] ‘What do they have? What [did] they possess that allowed them to be popular or smart or athletic?’ And at that point when I was younger I would pick apart people, maybe, [and ask myself.] ‘What are they doing differently that no one else is doing? What did he believe in that makes him this person? Who is he? Who is this person, woman, or girl or boy?’ And that’s when I started becoming this person [who] I am today, because I started searching around and looking for [something] different. If you want to call it a role model, you can--. . . different people that I respected or looked up to as I was growing up, as I was growing into an adult . . . They had something positive within their personalities, and I tried to find what it was and maybe [to] put it in me . . . I mean not to copy them, but just to see what made them tick and, hopefully, try to learn from that.”

Setting Goals

“Achievement for me is . . . maybe I can parallel that with success. You don’t have to win to be successful or to achieve. You don’t have to win a gold medal or set a record. I think if you are improving every day in your life, if you were, let’s say, you were in a competition. If you were fourth today and you were fifth last time, that’s an achievement. And achievement to me is constantly trying to better yourself, not being satisfied with what’s around you and trying to make things better. That’s the greatest thing about this country. If you do something you don’t like, you can try to change it, and the one thing you change, no matter what, is yourself. If you aren’t productive, you can try to change that. You can look inside yourself and challenge yourself, and for me achievement is setting a goal and reaching that goal, and setting another goal and reaching that goal, and constantly trying to raise the bar.”

Rewards of Achievement

“I’ve had a warm welcome from people. Nowhere has it been more warm and more sincere than [in] . . . Latino communities. That’s when I’ve really been embraced by people and by my culture. Now winning the award is kind of shocking in a way because I worked for years and years and years to reach a goal in speed skating. And to receive a reward like the Latino Spirit Award or the Hispanic Heritage Award--which is a lifetime achievement award--that was surprising. I didn’t know what the impact of my race would do to people of my background. I didn’t know that me skating a race and winning a medal would inspire other Latinos to try to achieve their dreams. I was always achieving my dreams, but the impact of the race in the Olympics went far beyond what I ever had
imagined . . . [and] I enjoyed that. I’m grateful for that because that changes someone’s mind. With young Latinos out there who [are] maybe doubting where they might go in their [lives], or maybe having trouble with taking a chance in their career or education, or whatever, or in sports--they can be somehow inspired by what I’ve done by taking a chance. That’s bigger than any medal I’ve could ever win--being able to affect someone’s life.”