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BY EZRA DAVID ROMERO

Twenty one students graduated from Caruthers High School this year through the Doctors Academy.

Thousands of students will graduate across Central California over the next few weeks. And as FM89’s Ezra David Romero reports, for a group of students in the small valley town of Caruthers, Thursday night’s graduation was a milestone in more ways than one.
Ermerendo Vasquez comes from a family that is plagued by diabetes. But he says that without the Doctors Academy at Caruthers High School, where he interned with a local physician, he wouldn’t have known how detrimental the disease can be.

Ermerendo Vasquez will be a first generation college student this fall at UC Santa Barbara.

“To me it was always someone else; it’s always a distant relative and not me,” Vasquez says. “Seeing that I realized it could be me. It made me more aware of what I was eating, what my family was eating. And I asked myself are we at risk and realized we are at risk.”

This year Vasquez is graduating at the top of his class and will be attending UC Santa Barbara in the fall where he will study to become a pharmacist. He’s one of 21 students to complete the program in Caruthers this year.

The Doctors Academy also takes place at Selma and Sunnyside high schools. It’s a partnership between Fresno Unified, the UCSF Fresno Latino Center for Medical Education and the Fresno County Office of Education.

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Dr. Katherine Flores founded the program at Caruthers High School nine years ago. This is the fifth cohort to graduate from the school.

“When I was in school we didn’t have such a thing,” Flores says. “It was something that I recognized the importance of and I wanted to help these kids not struggle so much in college and give them the roadmap to how to become a health professional rather than just falling into it.”
This year 81 students from all three schools will join the over 500 that have graduated and attended top universities across the state. Mark Fowler, the principal of Caruthers High School, says the program has changed the academic culture on the campus.

“Our average cohort size is about 30 kids so through four cohorts that’s 120 students out of 573 enrolled in the school,” Fowler says. “It’s a huge part of our campus culture and as those cohorts move through their grade level they justify AP courses that we can not only offer to them but to other students on the campus.”

Flores says her team hopes to change the way higher education is viewed across Central California.

The last of the three graduations will be be held May 22 at Sunnysdie High School in Southeast Fresno.

**Top Graduates**

Alondra Garduno, 17, UC Davis: BioMedical Engineer

“My mom would take us to the fields and work. She would say if you don’t want to stay here and be here for the rest of your lives then you need to continue with your studies and learn from this. If you want something better for yourself out of this country, continue school.”
Vivian Magdaleno, 17, UC Davis: Biology/Pre-Medicine
“It made me realize that being a doctor is more than learning the material, it’s also learning how to interact with you patients and having the understanding that we are all diverse and that it’s very important that we have doctors that are available to communicate with different ethnicities, because language is a big barrier in our cultures.”

Ermerendo Vasquez, 18, UC Santa Barbara: Economics/Pre-Pharmacy
“It’s made me more open to all the things that are happening in our community. There are so many health disparities – so many disparities in general – and I want to give back to my community. I think as a person, as people, as a society we should give back to our community. We should always be thinking about others instead of ourselves. I want to be a benefit to my community.”