



# Veteran made it his mission to encourage students to explore STEM careers

By Lindsay Peyton and Amber Elliott | January 5, 2018 | Updated: January 5, 2018 10:44pm



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Photo: Yi-Chin Lee, Houston Chronicle

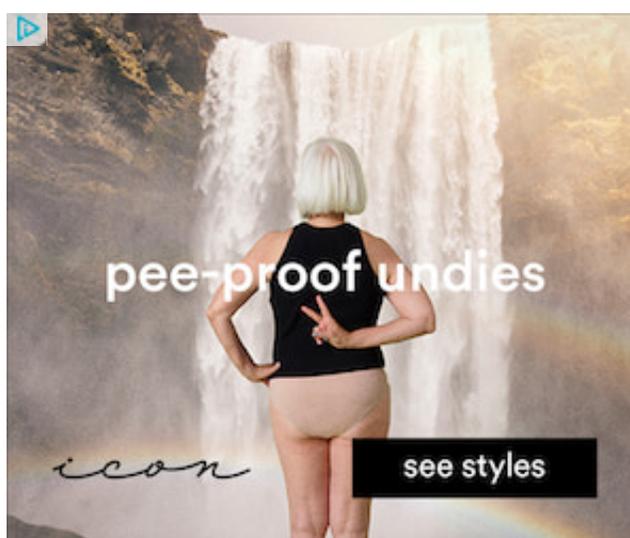
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Elias Sanchez-Perez pursued a degree in electrical engineering after retiring from the Air Force.

For Elias Sanchez-Perez, it's simple arithmetic.

"To reduce crime in the street, you have to have children in skilled labor positions," he said.

"Skilled jobs lead to higher wages. Higher wages lead to higher self-esteem."



Helping children pursue courses that will lead to solid employment is something that benefits the entire community, he explained.

And that's why Sanchez-Perez has spent the past three decades pushing students to study and then pursue jobs in STEM - science, technology, engineering and mathematics - fields.

In the past month, the League City resident helped organize two events on the subject - "STEM Symposium" at the University of Houston and "Skilled Job Training" at Houston Community College.

There have been a number of other symposiums that Sanchez-Perez has hosted through the

Gathering of Eagles, an organization of leaders from various veterans organizations around Houston. Sanchez-Perez is the group's director.

Originally from Corpus Christi, Sanchez-Perez served in the U.S. Air Force from 1952 to 1966 - and came back to a country that too often did not embrace its veterans.

"Society turned against us. The federal government turned against us," he said.

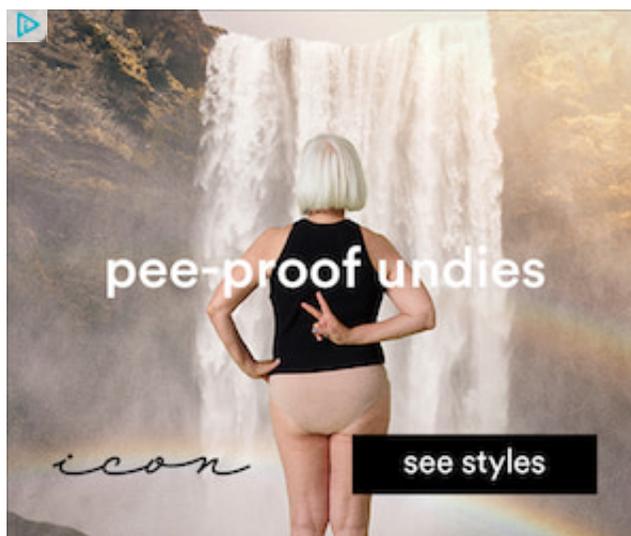
Sanchez-Perez said hitting the books was his way of coping. "I had to focus on something to stay sane, to keep my head above water, to keep a smile on my face," he said.

He enrolled at the University of Texas at Austin and pursued a degree in electrical engineering.

His studies, however, were interrupted by the constant distraction of watching football games.

"All my time was wasted," he said. "My grades dropped tremendously. My junior year, I went from As and Bs to Cs and Ds."

The dean intervened and told Sanchez-Perez that if he didn't improve his report cards, he would be "kicked out" of school.



"I changed my life," he said. "I didn't watch any more football. I started studying. My senior year, I made the dean's list. I graduated. I got my degree, and I ran with it."

He went on to earn his master's degree at the University of Colorado and then was hired as a contractor for IBM at NASA.

Before long, Sanchez-Perez became friends with the astronauts.

"I was an engineer doing design work, and they were learning to fly," he said.

Still, he realized they had a lot in common. Many shared his stories of struggling through school and eventually turning their destinies around.

Sanchez-Perez was convinced that if they could share their stories with students, they would inspire young people to persevere. He started hosting symposiums at NASA, inviting 1,000 students at a time to come meet Houston's astronauts. "I would tell everybody, 'It's easy not to focus, to listen to your friends and do what they say because you want to be popular,' " he recalled. "You can't do that. You have to put your future and your grades first."

In his discussions with NASA astronauts and those working in related industries, Sanchez-Perez became increasingly convinced that the future for area youth lay in STEM careers.

Houston is a haven for industry, engineering and medical jobs, he said. Instead of importing talented workers, he wanted these industries to have a local talent pool. He decided to help make that happen - by encouraging local students to pursue STEM-related degrees and certificate programs.

After retiring from NASA in 1995, he joined with the JROTC to continue advocating STEM programs to students in public schools from around the region.

They would bus students from school districts to learn about STEM.

"We would bring them together and preach about all of our core principles," Sanchez-Perez said. "Then, we would tell them about all the career fields. Any kind of degree or certificate will get you in the gate."

Lt. Col. Eugene A. Vecera met Sanchez-Perez around this time.

"He was with the JROTC here in HISD and utilizing their program to coordinate STEM. That was his starting point," Vecera said. "I said, 'Count me in.' "

Sanchez-Perez then grew his program, expanding beyond the JROTC to partnering with Houston ISD, the University of Houston and Houston Community College.

"What started out as a seed of an idea has grown into a huge tree," Vecera said. "This outreach has grown astronomically."

He said that Sanchez-Perez helps children realize all the possibilities that are out there in the STEM careers.

"They get exposed to people who are in the field, giving them insight," Vecera said.

Heather Dumjan, executive director of the STEM Center at the University of Houston, has become Sanchez-Perez's partner in presenting symposiums.

"Elias has done such a phenomenal job in moving STEM forward to the future," she said. "He's a master at getting different entities together to support STEM. We're all on his bandwagon. We see the fruits of his labor. It's a long-term investment."

About a year ago, Sanchez-Perez decided to shift his focus to ensure young women pursue STEM careers.

In partnership with Rice University, he is planning the "Reach for the Stars! Spring Outdoor STEM Festival" for next year.

"I'm bringing in 1,200 students - and they're all girls," he said. "To make it more appealing, it's going to be outdoors with a lot of demonstrations."

Sanchez-Perez wants to see interest in STEM continue to grow - and to reach more and more students.

"I'm like a piper or a band leader," he said. "If more children come out and dance, I'm not going to slow down or give up."

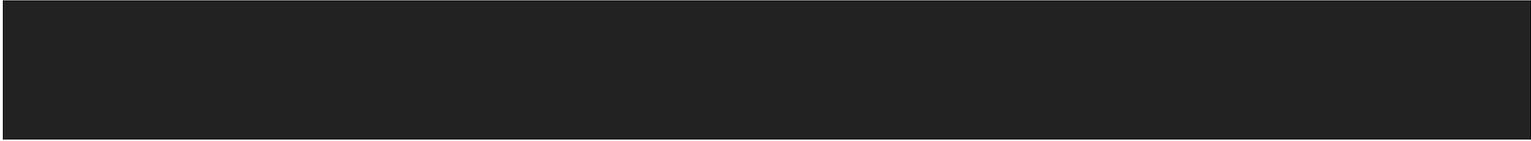


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