

North Texas city recognizes HPU alum for heroism

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GARLAND—The Garland Police Department recently recognized Cpl. Eric “Villy” Villanueva, a 2014 Howard Payne University graduate, for taking heroic, life-saving actions in rescuing a woman from a burning vehicle. And Villanueva credited God’s grace for perfect timing that enabled the rescue.

Last November, Villanueva was traveling through Garland when he witnessed the single-vehicle accident. A car went over a bridge, landed on its hood and immediately caught on fire.

“It was about 2 or 3 in the morning, and I was the only one around,” said Villanueva, who was a deputy in the Hood County sheriff’s office at the time. “I sprinted down the hill praying that there wasn’t more than one person in the car, because I knew it would be hard to get everyone out.”

As the flames were near the front of the vehicle, Villanueva used his baton to break the back window and a knife to cut through the deployed airbags. Unable to see clearly, he called out but received no response.

“I crawled into the car and saw someone in the driver’s seat, hanging from the seatbelt,” he said. “She was unresponsive and bleeding severely.”

Perfect timing ‘by God’s grace’



Cpl. Eric Villanueba

As the flames grew closer, Villanueba cut the woman's seatbelt and began to drag her toward the back window. Other people who had arrived on scene by that time helped him pull the woman from the car.

"By God's grace, it was perfect timing," he said. "The car engulfed in flames as soon as we got out."

Villanueba, now an officer with the Palmer Police Department, credits his training for his quick actions.

"We're trained to do things like that even if our lives are at risk," he said. "My only thought was to save as many people as I could."

'A servant's heart'

He is thankful for education he received through Howard Payne's criminal justice program.

"Howard Payne gave me a servant's heart," he said. "Professors like Lynn Humeniuk teach you how to serve others and be there for others. HPU is where I rededicated my life to God."

Humeniuk, associate professor of criminal justice and sociology and director of the criminal justice program, said she was not surprised to learn that Villanueba saved a life.

“He was born to serve and protect,” she said. “As an undergraduate on the HPU campus, Villy was popular with faculty and students, and he was a leader who continually gave above and beyond what was needed to get a job completed.

“I have seen him several times since November and only learned last week from someone else that he saved a woman’s life. He is humble in that way, and a true professional in every sense of the word. I am very proud of this HPU graduate from the criminal justice program, and I know that God will continue to use him in a mighty way.”