

Student fakes pregnancy for her senior project

S.T. 4/22/11

REMOVES PRETEND 'BUMP' AT ASSEMBLY

6½-month scheme gets national attention

BY ADRIANA JANOVICH AND PHIL FEROLITO
Yakima Herald-Republic

TOPPENISH, Yakima County — Gaby Rodriguez would worry whenever anyone asked to touch her baby bump.

It wasn't because she felt shy or embarrassed. It was because the bulge — fashioned from wire mesh and cotton quilt batting — didn't actually contain a baby.

For the past 6½ months — the bulk of her senior year at Toppenish High School — the 17-year-old "A" student faked her own pregnancy.

Only a handful of people — her mother, boyfriend and principal among them — knew Gaby Rodriguez was pretending to be pregnant for her senior project, a culminating assignment required for graduation.

Her teachers and fellow students, except for her best friend, didn't realize they were part of a social experiment. Neither did six of her seven siblings, her boyfriend's parents, and his five siblings.

"At times, I just wanted to take it off and be done," she says.

But Rodriguez didn't give up the charade until Wednesday, when she revealed her secret during an emotional, all-school assembly.

Fighting stereotypes

The topic of her presentation: "Stereotypes, rumors and statistics."

"Teenagers tend to live in the shadows of these elements," she says.

Before removing her fake belly in front of the entire student body, she told her audience: "Many things were said about me. Many ... traveled all the way back to me."

Then, she asked several students and teachers to read statements from 3x5 cards, quotes people actually said about her in the past months.

Her best friend, Saida Cortes, read one: "Her attitude is changing, and it might be because of the baby — or she was always this annoying and I never realized it."

It grew quiet as more and more quotes were read. Then Rodriguez dropped her bomb: "I'm fighting against those stereotypes and rumors because the reality is I'm not pregnant."

She had been nervous



GORDON KING / YAKIMA HERALD-REPUBLIC

Toppenish High School senior Gaby Rodriguez, who faked pregnancy as part of her senior project, talks about rumors and stereotypes at a school assembly.

about how the crowd might react. After all, she had been lying to them since October.

"It 'happened' at homecoming," says Principal Trevor Greene, making air quotes with his fingers at the word "happened."

"She sacrificed her senior year to find out what it would be like to be a potential teen mom," he says.

National attention

Calls from regional and national media outlets flooded phone lines at Toppenish

High School on Thursday.

"It's gone big; it's been quite a day," said Greene, who was still fielding media inquiries about 4 p.m. "We didn't anticipate that by the end of the day we'd be getting calls from, like, the 'Today' show."

At least one college recruiter called the Herald-Republic in an effort to speak with Rodriguez. So did a local business owner who was so impressed with her story that she wanted to offer her a scholarship.

Greene said he was caught off-guard by the reaction, but added that it likely will lead to an overall positive experience for Rodriguez, who has a grade-point average of 3.8.

"I would bet that she is going to learn just as much about herself in the coming weeks as she did about herself over the last six months," Greene said.

"Thought she was nuts"

Rodriguez began wearing her homemade, basketball-sized, prosthetic belly to school after spring break. Before that, she wore baggy sweaters and sweatshirts to cover her faux pregnancy.

Her supposed due date was July 27.

When Rodriguez told her boyfriend, Jorge Orozco, 20, about her plan, "I thought she was nuts," the 2009 Top-

penish High School graduate says. "I thought I was going to end up getting into problems with her brothers. I didn't really want to get into problems with anybody."

But, "I was doing it for her," he says, adding: "My parents thought it was going to be a boy."

Wednesday, when she took off her baby belly, there were a few nervous giggles, and a loud: "Whaaaaat?!" from the audience.

And, at the end of the assembly, following a Q&A session, there was a standing ovation, the first one Greene says he remembers during his three-year tenure at Toppenish High School.

"She really fooled me. I never would've guessed it," says 17-year-old senior Vicente Villanueva. "I'm really surprised."