

SURPRISE HITTER; VALLEY TEEN'S STAR RISING IN BOXING MOVIE.(News)

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Daily News Byline: Jesse Hiestand Staff Writer

At 14, Ernesto Hernandez was a pudgy teen-ager who tore into the heavy bag at backyard boxing rings, determined to lose weight and gain respect.

Now trim and agile, the 17-year-old San Fernando youngster is starring next to Emmy Award-winning actor Jimmy Smits in the feature film "Price of Glory," in which he portrays the youngest son of a boxer.

And no one is more surprised than Ernesto.

"When I was overweight, if I got a second look it was out of sympathy," Ernesto said Tuesday, while taking a break between classes at San Fernando High School. "Now with the movie - it's completely different. I have all kinds of people approaching me."

The teen-ager beat out 2,000 others at an open casting call in February, and according to the movie producer - it was no contest.

"The director just pulled him out of the line and brought him in with another select group of about 40," producer Moctesuma Esparza said during a news conference.

"We were looking for someone about 16 with a boxing background. He was perfect. When he read he was just a natural. He had charisma," said Esparza.

For Ernesto, the big break has yielded an avalanche of attention from agents, managers and movie producers.

But this computer whiz, who stays after school to help other kids in the campus technology lab, insists he has retained his modesty - especially around classmates.

"I don't want them to see me and say, God, he's a movie star, because I'm still the same person as before," he said.

Hernandez tries to keep quiet about the movie at school but word has gotten around.

"It's something to be very proud of," said senior Roxanna Flores, 17. "But he's not parading around school like, I'm in a movie. It hasn't gone to his head. He's a real well-rounded student."

Albeit one with enough acting talent to play opposite Smits in the New Line Cinema film, which is set to be released early next year.

Smits was filming a movie in Toronto on Tuesday and was unavailable for comment.

Ernesto's break came during an open casting call at the Conga Room in February.

Prodded by an older sister who acts in plays, Ernesto went to the audition reluctantly.

"I thought it was a waste of time," he said. "I was just going to go in, give my name and leave."

He arrived early and waited at the front of the line with brother-in-law Robert Mora, who had earlier taught him to box.

"I was pretty positive that if they just saw him, he would be picked," said Mora, now Hernandez's manager.

But at the time, Hernandez had no acting experience aside from a few classroom skits. The only other time he tried out for a role - in an elementary school play - he was passed over and cast instead as a dancer.

In the years leading up to that tense Saturday morning casting call, he busied himself with schoolwork and became engrossed with computers.

"I never really paid attention to the drama - cry this way, feel this emotion," he said. "I guess that's what helped me during the call because when I got there it was completely new, and I was completely honest with my portrayal."

The movie's makers liked what they saw, from Hernandez's pony tail and assured walk to his grasp of the character, "Johnny Ortega."

"By the end of the day he was rehearsing with Jimmy Smits," Esparza said.

What followed was two months of training to box Hollywood-style, to throw punches but not land them. He did his own stunt work in the film.

Set in Maricosa, Ariz., "Price of Glory" tells the story of a one-time boxer (Smits) who tries to revive his dreams through his three sons, two of whom are portrayed by seasoned actors. Ernesto was cast as the third son.

Esparza said he often tries to find new faces for his films, just as he had cast some roles in another of his films, "Selena." He also produced the "Milagro Beanfield War," "Gettysburg" and "Introducing Dorothy Dandridge."

"Price of Glory" was filmed in Arizona and around Los Angeles, including St. Ferdinand's Catholic Church in San Fernando.

Hernandez was on set throughout March, keeping up with his studies through a private tutor.

It was only then, when the production started rolling that reality set in.

"Once I was on the set filming, signing the contract, then I was like, This is for real. That's when I was just overwhelmed."

Hernandez's commitment to his family and studies has not abated with his brush with Hollywood. He still wakes about 6 a.m. every school day and has breakfast with his mom before heading to class.

He writes for the school newspaper, plays on the tennis team and helped build the school's computer center. Evenings are dedicated to homework, hanging out with friends or playing with his Rottweiler "Cheeks."

While he is making an effort to see more movies now, Hernandez said he was never infatuated with the industry or its stars.

Through his exposure to the technical side of movie making, Hernandez was inspired to start a film festival at school featuring short films by students and faculty.

The goal, he said, is to demonstrate the value of teamwork that he saw in action on the set.

"Ernesto is a leader because he knows how to make other people feel important," said one of his instructors, social studies teacher Marco Torres.

CAPTION(S):

2 photos

Photo: (1 -- 2 -- color) San Fernando Valley High senior Ernesto Hernandez, 17, right, is co-starring with Jimmy Smits in the film "Price of Glory," scheduled for release early next year.

Charlotte Schmid-Maybach/Staff Photographer

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