Student's hard work pays off

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By J. NIELSEN
Correspondent

MANATEE COUNTY — "Overwhelmed" is the word **Sandra Nino** uses to describe her feeling upon arriving in the United States from Colombia at the age 16 and not speaking a word of English.

"The most difficult thing to do is leave aside your insecurity," Nino said.

Now 21, she has graduated from Manatee High School and Manatee Technical Institute with a certificate in accounting and Web page design. Through MTI, she won a gold medal in Web design at the Skills USA contest in Kansas City, Mo., in May. And she earned a $10,000 scholarship to The Art Institute in Tampa.

"Everything you have to work for; it doesn't come easy," she said.

Nino credits much of her success to help she received from the Literacy Council of Manatee County, which provides free tutoring services for anyone wanting to learn English. All tutors donate their time.

"Sandra is very bright, very motivated and a joy to work with. She reads as fast as anybody I know," said her literacy tutor for two years, **Abe Epstein,** a retired professor from Iowa State University.

The Skills USA contest started with local, regional and state competitions and culminated with the national competition, where 16 groups vied for the grand prize. The skills tested were reading, Web design and an interview. Nino and her partner, **Jason Hagelberg,** designed a Web site after being given four photos and asked to create a banner and logo. In total, there were six challenges over two days.

"It was really cool," Nino said. "It is not every day you get a gold medal."

Nino wants to earn a bachelor's degree in Web design. In addition to speaking English and Spanish, she can write computer code with HTML, DHTML, JavaScript, ASP and PHP.

Sandra Nino shows her Skills USA gold medal at the Literacy Council of Manatee County offices. CORRESPONDENT PHOTO / J. NIELSEN

"I always liked computers," Nino said. "I like expressing yourself through Web design. Web design can reflect what a company is, and what the company is offering people."

Because of Nino's gratitude for the help she received from the Literacy Council, she went through training by the Florida Literacy Coalition to become a Literacy Ambassador.

Nino is a very successful illustration of what the council does, said **Lori Johnson,** executive director. Nino represents the council by speaking to service organizations and businesses asking for volunteer tutors.

"It is a way that I can help this institution and help others to succeed in life," she said.

INTERESTED?

What: Literacy Council of Manatee County.
Where: 1701 14th St. W., Suite 5, Bradenton.
Adult Spelling Bee: The dinner event will be 6 to 10 p.m. Sept. 12 at the Elks Lodge, 2511 75th St. W., Bradenton. Teams include the Rotary clubs of East Manatee, Palmetto and West Bradenton, Sertoma Club, CPA Associates, Manatee Memorial Hospital, Whitney Bank, Village of the Arts, and Des Champs and Gregory. Spectator tickets are $30.
Miscellaneous: One-quarter of the Literacy Council's funding is provided by the United Way, and the remainder is raised through private grants, donations and fundraisers like the Spelling Bee.
Information: 746-8197 or www.manateeliteracy.org.