

## HERO OF THE MONTH

# Negotiating obstacles

## Paralyzed woman counsels youth on gun violence

*Hero of the Month spotlights those men and women, civil servants and civilians, who go beyond the call of duty to make New York a better place.*

**By PATRICE O'SHAUGHNESSY**

DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

Graciela Ramirez, a computer science major with a Phi Beta Kappa key, is set to graduate magna cum laude from Hunter College next week.

That's quite an accomplishment in itself, but Ramirez achieved academic excellence not only as she overcame a host of obstacles, but while giving her time and energy to help prevent tragedies such as the one that put her in a wheelchair for life.

She was left paralyzed from the waist down nine years ago by a bullet wound to her spine. She lives in a city nursing home on Roosevelt Island, and travels by tramway and bus to Hunter every day.

She has counseled young people as a member of the Gunrunners, a group of disabled athletes who are in wheelchairs because of gun violence. And she spoke at Brooklyn's Million Mom March on Mother's Day.

Ramirez has also tutored children at Public School 217 on Roosevelt Island, and served as an advocate for people in nursing homes.

For showing courage and dignity as she strives to contribute to the city, Ramirez is the Daily News Hero of the Month.

"She is an extraordinary woman," said Tamara Green, chairwoman of the classics department at Hunter, who taught Ramirez in Greek and Latin classes at the college. "She has had a lot to go through to make a life for herself, and she's done it."

Leslie Winter, the executive director of the Achilles Club who organized the Gunrunners as an educational outreach program, said Ramirez's talks at schools and to community groups have been "very

effective ... she is brilliant and a bit shy, so putting her on stage was an opportunity for her as well as the kids."

Ramirez came to New York from her home in a Mexico City suburb for a vacation with friends here in 1988.

She was 22, a student attending the National School for Biological Sciences in Mexico, studying biochemistry and engineering.

"I liked it here. I wanted to stay, and I got a job as a cashier at a gas station," said Ramirez, 34. "I didn't know English and I wanted to learn, and I went to

Kingsborough Community College."

She planned to get back into biochemistry after the English language classes. She was living and working in Canarsie, Brooklyn, when on the night of Feb. 23, 1992, her ex-boyfriend showed up at the service station.

"He had hit me once, so I got an order of protection against him, and he bothered me again, so he spent a couple days in jail," Ramirez said. "When he got out, he shot me."

She recounts how he shot her four times, pointing to two places on her neck, one near her shoulder, and one in the stomach.

That last bullet went to her spine. She fell and couldn't move, and he fell next to her; he had fatally shot himself.

She awoke in Brookdale University Hospital, a physician telling her:

"You'll never walk again." After the shooting, she lost her apartment, car and her job. She had no family here.

She was sent to Goldwater Memorial Hospital on Roosevelt Island for rehabilitation, where she met many other young victims; it was a time of unbridled gun violence fueled by the crack cocaine epidemic in the city.

Then she was sent to Coler Memorial Hospital, a long-term care facility, where she still resides.

But she didn't let her grim diagnosis get her down.

In 1992, her physical therapist encouraged her to enter the Special Olympics. She competed in weight-lifting and hoisted 139 pounds, winning first place among women.

In 1993, she entered the New York City Marathon, and has completed it every year since. Last year, using a new hand-crank wheelchair, she had her best time — a little more than four hours.

"I like it because the crowds and the runners cheer you on," said Ramirez. "I think if I can do the marathon, I can do anything."

She became a member of the Achilles Track Club, an international group of disabled athletes. It was through Achilles that she got interested in Gunrunners.

"They only had guys, and no women," she said of the group of athletes who are survivors of gun violence. As part of the group's outreach program, Ramirez talks to kids in area schools. "It was a hard story to tell at first. ... I tell them the part about getting shot really fast, because it's still hard for me to talk about."

"Then I tell them how you don't have to be involved in drugs or anything bad. Somebody who loves you could hurt you, because it's so easy to get a gun."

Two weeks ago, at the Mother's Day rally, she spoke to women who had lost their children to guns.

"I said my story again, but then I started crying, because they were saying how hard it is to lose a child, and I started thinking of my mother, how she has to see me like this..."

Her mother, Maria Elena Noya, came up from Mexico and will attend the graduation ceremony at SummerStage in Central Park on June 6.

Ramirez's goal is to earn a master's degree in business administration, and launch a computer business that employs the disabled.

"I want to bring them out of the nursing homes," she said. "So many young people have a brain, but not the will to use it — or the help to use it."

**Graciela Ramirez is on her way as she gets ready to graduate, from Hunter College, magna cum laude.**

