SALT LAKE CITY — Growing up in Aguascalientes, Mexico, Sergio Lopez's father could only go so far in his education. He wanted better for his son.

"He wanted to be somebody in life, that's what he always told me," Lopez said. "That's what keeps me going, because I want to be somebody too."

Lopez, a football standout at Hunter High in West Valley City, will take his next step this fall when he enrolls at the University of Utah to study engineering. He plans to attend for one year, then go on a mission for the Mormon church before returning.

Lopez was one of several students recently awarded scholarships from private donors or the U.'s Alumni Association and recognized at Partners in the Park, an event held each summer at parks throughout Salt Lake City's west side. It's the U.'s attempt to reach kids in Glendale, Rose Park and other low income neighborhoods.

"The university needs to be a visible presence here, not just up on the hill," said Rosemarie Hunter, director of University Neighborhood Partners, which organizes the gatherings.

At the event in Jordan Park, kids listened to music, sucked on Italian ice and watched dance performances. They also scooped up posters for U. athletic programs and spun a wheel labeled with potential careers: lawyer, teacher, veterinarian. The goal is to get them thinking about college early — and planning how to get there.

Oscar Figueroa said he will use his scholarship to go to Salt Lake Community College for a year and then transfer to the U. He eventually wants to study environmental law.
Figueroa credited his experience as a mentor for UNP for spurring him on to college. "It definitely influenced me to continue my education and help others move on," he said.

It was the fourth year in a row that Harold and Joan Wolf, retired teachers at the U., have funded someone's college education through the program. The couple's fathers both came from Russia as children.

Looking around, Harold Wolf said, "Every parent in this pavilion wants their child to have a better life than they had. A relatively small amount of money can make a huge difference in the lives of first-generation immigrants."

His wife added, "The potential in this community is enormous."

There were 88 graduates at the U. this year from Glendale and Rose Park, and 62 at Salt Lake Community College, according to figures Hunter provided. The number of U. graduates from those areas doubled from the debut of Partners in the Park seven years ago to a peak of 145 (plus 79 at SLCC) in 2008 and has since fallen with the recession, she said.

There will be four more Partners in the Park events this summer: July 13 at Sherwood Park, 400 S. 1500 West; July 20 at Westpointe Park, 1100 N. 2000 West; Aug. 3 at Riverside Park, 739 N. 1400 West; and Aug. 17 at Constitution Park, 300 N. 1300 West. Each runs from 6 to 8 p.m.