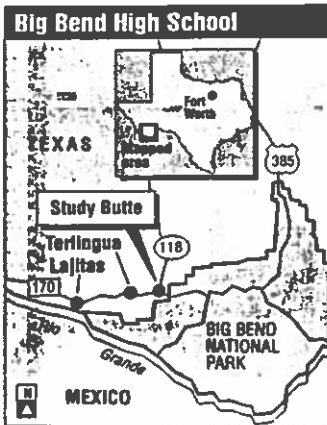


**"Once you come here, you can't leave unless you finish."**



Star-Telegram/RODGER MALLIN

The two graduates of Big Bend High School's Class of 1998, Yesica Garcia, left, and Claudia Garcia (not related), pose for a picture in Study Butte.



Star-Telegram/JIM ATKINSON

# Big Bend's small wonder

By BARRY SHLACHTER  
Star-Telegram Staff Writer

Study Butte's first graduating class dwindled from six to two, but pride in the school's graduates has more to do with the quality of education than it does with quantity.

**STUDY BUTTE** — First, there were six. A classmate's fatal fall from a cliff during their junior year, then the dropping out of another at the start of 12th grade left four. Then the Rodriguez twins ended up a few points short on the state TAAS exam.

Last night, only Yesica Garcia and Claudia Garcia donned cinnabar-colored robes and matching mortarboards at Big Bend High School for what the Texas Association of Community Schools said was the smallest graduating class of any public school in the state.

"I cried when I heard the twins couldn't graduate with us," said Claudia Garcia, 18, the salutatorian, reflecting the close-knit nature of the school, which is in the Chihuahuan desert with a backdrop of mountains called Bee and Cuesta Blanca.

There is no gym, lunchroom or library for the 47 students. But the school shared by three towns and a national park has other things.

There is a computer for every two kids, small classes and personal attention where one-on-one violin or pre-calculus classes are there for the asking. And there's a golf coach who

Star-Telegram/RODGER MALLIN

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es carts in a quiet arrange- that gives his players free in a nearby course.

graduating class in ay makes it less an achieve- for the two unrelated girls each overcame formidable cles. Or for the remote com- ty, which observed the first ation inside a new school it struggled to build through a onwide fund-raising cam- .

s had been done for decades, ca and Claudia endured the try's longest school bus ride — miles round trip — from the as-Terlingua-Study Butte area igh school in Alpine during r freshman and sophomore s.

hey would rise at 4:30 a.m. the 5:45 morning run and m home after 6 p.m. Sports other extracurricular activities out of the question. The gru- g commute not only fueled and for the area's own high ol, but also contributed to a ercent dropout rate.

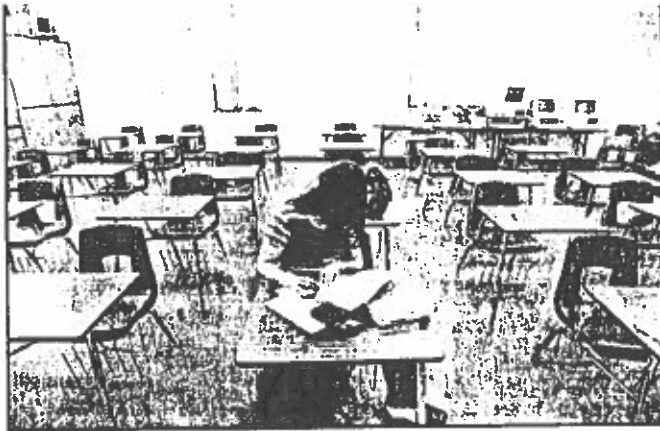
ories about the students' at in publications as disparate *The New York Times* and *The onal Enquirer* stirred interest plan locally considered for 30 re 500 only seriously acted 1992.

igh school classes began in 6 by sharing space with Terlin- 's middle school and holding e outdoors. Big Bend High its own building in August — icks to \$450,000 in donations n as far away as Maine.

I don't know if I could have e it if I had to ride the bus r years," said Claudia Garcia. o moved to the Big Bend area 4 after living in Houston and essa. And there were other llenges.

Short, with steady, intelligent s, Claudia Garcia got married junior year, delivered a baby e months ago and after classes rked four to five hours as a el desk clerk.


'I had a lot of support from my ily, from my teachers. Once I come here, you can't leave ess you finish. They help you much. And you can only pay in back through graduating."



Star-Telegram/ROBERT MATHISON

Yesica Garcia, valedictorian of Big Bend High School, takes her pre-calculus exam in the one-student class.

### Big Bend High School

 Students	47
Teachers	6
Full time	5
Part time	0
Lunchrooms	0
Classrooms	6
Student computers	23
Cheerleaders	#
UIL Sports	1
Libraries	0
Security guards	0
Graduating seniors	2
No. in Senior class	4

### Terlingua-Lajitas-Study Butte

 Traffic lights	0
Elevators	0
Churches	2
Movie theaters	0
Fast food outlets	0
Taverns	2
Hitching posts	1

Star-Telegram/JIMATHURTON

said Garcia, who is looking into Texas colleges that have day-care facilities. Her ambition is to become a school counselor.

Her classmate's story is at least as remarkable.

The youngest of 10 children, Yesica Garcia was born in nearby San Carlos, Mexico, and started in the district at 8 not speaking a word of English.

Yesterday, she became the first in her family to graduate from high school. Now she plans to be the first to attend college.

The former English as a Second Language student maintained an A average, made National Honor Society and valedictorian, was student body president and class secretary and played on the golf team — the school's only University Interscholastic League sport. All along, she worked as a teacher's aide for pre-kinder-

garten class in the morning and relieved Claudia Garcia at the motel in the evenings.

"My goal is to prove to my parents that everything they did for me was worth it," said Yesica Garcia, 18, whose mother is a hotel housekeeper and father runs an earth mover at the Lajitas resort. She shelved plans to study in the East because of her mother's poor health and will attend Sul Ross State University in Alpine with the hope of becoming a teacher.

Yesica (who pronounces her name "Jessica") gives the impression that she can tackle anything. And her teachers believe she can.

"Yesica is the kind of student that keeps people like me in education," said Kathy Killingsworth, who was the ESL teacher the day a shy second-grader showed up for her first day of classes in the United States.

Affectionately called "Mrs. K" by students, Killingsworth is the Terlingua district superintendent and principal of the high school, which is shared with the smaller San Vicente district. She quickly mobilizes teachers to dissuade any student contemplating quitting school, an effort that has resulted in a mere 3 percent dropout rate.

More important, teachers say, she has set a warm, collegial tone for a school where students volunteer to scrub windows and install new lockers, and even the toughest kids read to elementary students across the way.

Last year, the high school students prepared a Thanksgiving

dle-schoolers and all the teachers after a local woman who had done it for years became too ill to continue the tradition.

Head teacher Vaughn Camacho said there are no gangs, no security guards and no metal detectors at Big Bend High.

"The biggest problem? Chewing gum," he said.

The school has six full-time teachers and five part-timers. And the caliber is astounding. Garry Henderson has a doctorate in geophysics and worked on the Apollo space program. He taught at Western Hills High School in Fort Worth before joining Big Bend.

The school is small enough that students know, and exploit the fact, that Bettina Kearns — who teaches art, government, economics, U.S. history and world history and geography — is addicted to Dr Pepper, consuming six a day.

But there are no cheerleaders, pep rallies or Friday night football at Big Bend High.

There is golf, and when both the boys' and girls' teams competed at a regional championship in Abilene, it was the highlight of the year and included a vividly remembered visit to a mall.

Many of the kids work after school. Weekends often mean a trip to Ojinaga, Mexico — "OJ" to the students — where there are discos, Claudia Garcia said. Some also ride horses and four-wheelers in the starkly beautiful desert that is their back yard.

The school has no library, but a Dallas foundation donated a state-of-the-art computer lab that has made many of the Big Bend students cyber-savvy.

Part-time teachers like Steve Brennecke have brought courses larger schools would envy, including classes on oceanography and meteorology.

Unlike most of the five graduates in the film *Dancer, Texas Pop. 81*, a fictional town set, like Study Butte, in Brewster County, the two Big Bend grads say they have no doubt where they're headed.

"I'm coming back to the school and teach here," Yesica Garcia said.

As for Claudia Garcia, "I told my mom I'll move away — but I'll be back. I'll make sure my daughter will go to this school."