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"I saw ... the power that physicians have to make a positive difference for people," says immigrant Carla Plaza, a former teen mom who will graduate from UCI next June with a bachelor's degree in biochemistry & molecular biology. "I wanted to one day make others feel like that, and nothing was going to stop me." Steve Zylius / University Communications

Against all odds

BY TOM VASICH, UNIVERSITY COMMUNICATIONS ON NOVEMBER 5, 2012

No one can tell Carla Plaza she hasn't earned the right to a college education.

The 35-year-old senior in biochemistry & molecular biology at UC Irvine is months away from getting a bachelor's degree — the first in her family to do so — and taking another step toward her childhood dream of becoming a doctor.

To reach this point, Plaza overcame seemingly endless hardships and the assumption that a Latino-immigrant, Spanish-speaking, single teenage mother from Downey who worked menial fast-food and gas station jobs to support herself and her young son couldn't one day graduate from one of the nation's premier research institutions — with a 3.7 GPA.

Most who face her challenges scale down their ambitions or leave them behind altogether. But even as she flipped greasy burgers and cleaned restrooms, Plaza never let her dream die. What kept it alive were sheer will, endless positive energy and access to higher education.

During her 20s, while sometimes working two jobs a day, Plaza still squeezed in night classes at Cerritos College. "I just love to learn," she says. "I learned about art, about Shakespeare, about history. I was just a sponge."

Finally, her efforts began paying off: Plaza secured a decent-paying job selling home entertainment technologies. But consumer comforts did not bring satisfaction. "I was making money but *not* making a difference. How was I contributing to society?" she says.

Plaza kept recalling the times when, as a little girl in Peru, she dutifully accompanied her grandmother on visits to the family physician. As older people do, Lucila Leon Velarde suffered aches and pains, and Plaza was amazed that just a few caring moments with the compassionate doctor could make her *abuelita* feel so much better.

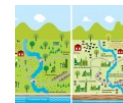
"I saw then the power that physicians have to make a positive difference for people," Plaza says. "I wanted to one

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day make others feel like that, and nothing was going to stop me.”

In her late 20s, Plaza met with an Army recruiter on behalf of her brother Nelson, who was immigrating to the U.S. and wanted to join the military. But the focus of her conversation with the recruiter soon shifted. “I told him I wanted to be a doctor, and he showed me that I could be a medic in the Army. I could do that?” Plaza recalls. “So I enlisted!”

With her cousin taking care of her son, Miguel, she went off to boot camp. She served at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio as an emergency medical technician. Plaza also became an American citizen, proudly wearing her Army uniform while standing in the front row of the courtroom.

She remembers the judge telling her own immigrant story of being a divorced mother of two who dreamed of going to law school. “And she became a judge!” Plaza says. “I was sure that if she could do that, I could become a doctor.”

After two years of Army service, she returned to her old job but quit after three months. “I told my son, who was 14, that I really wanted to become a doctor, and for me to do this, we would have to sacrifice,” she says. “I needed him to support me and to understand that we were not going to be able to go on vacation, buy new video games. We could only afford what we needed, not what we wanted.”

After finishing her prerequisite courses at El Camino College, Plaza was accepted to UC San Diego, UC Davis, UCLA, USC and UCI. The Irvine campus’s Center for Educational Partnerships made UCI the best fit, she says, and financial aid made it accessible.

Plaza is among the more than half of the Anteater student body that receives monetary support, and students at UCI and other University of California campuses graduate with a lower debt load than those at any other highly ranked public research institution in the U.S.

To further assist students like Plaza, the UC system has created the Blue + Gold Opportunity Plan, under which families earning less than \$80,000 a year could have all fees covered. About half of UCI students qualify for this program.

Now in her third year at UCI and with help from the Center for Educational Partnerships, Plaza has received more than \$30,000 in support from a Sharon A. Cheever, Esq. and Honorable Luis Rodriguez Scholarship, a Dr. Juan F. Lara scholarship and a Edison International UC Edison Scholarship, and she garnered a 2011 Pfizer AIR Diversity Fellowship in Organic Chemistry.

She readily admits that financial aid is “immensely important. It has allowed me to go to school full time and succeed. I’m 35, and I’ve worked hard for this time to come, and getting this support helps me do it. Financial aid has made a difference in my life and my son’s life. It also has allowed me to help other people.”

As required by her Edison scholarship, Plaza goes to high schools in underserved communities and talks to students about going to college. As a member of the Army National Guard, she volunteers in local clinics. And she’s found the time to be a Big Sister, mentoring a 12-year-old Latino girl.

Over the summer, Plaza spent a month in India, working on a global health project to fight infectious diseases in Mumbai — courtesy of a Child Family Health International scholarship.

Kika Friend, a program director in the Center for Educational Partnerships, says that Plaza’s success in so many areas comes from courage, adaptation and perseverance.

“Carla has the wonderful ability to transform herself and do well in whatever environment she’s in,” Friend says. “That says a lot about her. She works very effectively and has the ability to connect where the resources are so that she can keep moving.”

Plaza plans to spend the next year preparing for medical school. She hopes to be admitted to UCI’s highly acclaimed Program in Medical Education for the Latino Community, the first such program in the U.S. to address the distinctive healthcare needs of America’s largest minority population.

But first, this coming June, she and Miguel, now 17, will both attend commencement ceremonies — hers at UCI, which will award her a bachelor’s degree in biochemistry & molecular biology, and his at Irvine’s University High School, where he’ll receive his diploma.

Considering the challenges both have faced, their achievements are a tribute to hard work, commitment and the promise of a high-quality education for all Californians. "It's crazy! We've been so blessed," Plaza says. "All the good you do comes back to you. I believe that."

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100 Theory, Suite 200
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