Dream Big

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Isela Phelps went from speaking one word of English when she arrived in the US to earning two degrees from the Huntsman School. Here’s her incredible journey, in her own words.

During the Spring of 2017, a colleague approached me about a new master’s program that was made available online by the Huntsman School of Business. As an on-campus employee at Utah State, I could take both online and on-campus classes. Intrigued, I figured, “Sure, why not? Let’s try it!”

Let me take you back a few years, 27 years to be exact. I arrived in the US from Mexico on May 10, 1990. I was 14 years old. At the time, I spoke one word of English: Hamburger! I learned it on the plane from California to New York. Yes, it proves one thing, my life revolves around food!

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Shortly after I arrived, I had two jobs: one as a sewing worker, and another delivering newspapers. I delivered newspapers from 3:30 a.m. to 7:30 a.m., and then went to the factory to sew blankets from 8 p.m. to 6 p.m. I was living the American dream, working, earning money, and not suffering as I was suffering back at home. We had food, so much food. If we wanted to eat steak every day, we could eat steak. Back at home, we had steak maybe once per month! I was having the time of my life and in a sense, I was progressing. However, my heart yearned to be like all the other teens around me. I wanted more for my future than working 4 a.m. to 7 p.m. I wanted to learn the language and get a good job that didn’t require me to work on a sewing machine (I am terrified of those monsters!).

The following year, I begged my mom to let me go to school. I didn’t know what I was asking of her at the time. I was only thinking of me, and not the sacrifice that it meant for her and for my aunt. After a little convincing, she registered me in school. Why did I even have to ask? Simple, you come to the US to make a better living. If you work, you are earning money. No work, no money. One less person working at home meant less money. It was a sacrifice for my mom since
she now had the responsibility to support me and my dreams of going to school. A roof over our heads is expensive, food on the table is expensive, clothes are expensive, books...all of that meant someone had to pay for it.

The first two years of high school were rough. My knowledge of the English language was subpar, to say the least. I was placed in ESL classes for all my courses. It was humbling on many levels. Not only did I not know the language, but the only thing that I could do without having to translate was math. All the other subjects took me forever to get through.

Over the next few years, I became the number one consumer of Folger’s Coffee in Queens, New York. I slept probably an average of three hours per night. I would read my assignments, translate them with a dictionary, read them again, write them in Spanish, then translate them back to English. A lot of the time, my mom would fix me breakfast and she would find the pot of coffee in my room, my books all over my bed, and mountains of paper. I watched TV and listened to the radio only in English, which was a hardship at home as we didn’t understand what we were watching, but my family knew that I had to immerse myself in the language.

Senior year arrived, and I realized that I had nothing to put on a college application. I had dedicated every spare moment of my life to learning the language. I hadn’t had the time to do anything else beyond studying for my classes. School was my full-time job, however, I knew that if I wanted a chance at college, I had to show more than my ability to study. I made it a point to join as many clubs as I could, and I enrolled in a couple of concurrent classes.

Then I met with my counselor. I came out of that visit with a heavy heart. It turned out that you needed money—a lot of money—to go to college. Money that we didn’t have. I went home and I cried. Why didn’t my hard work count? Why did my grade point average and my dedication amount to nothing in the eyes of an institution? It was a sobering moment.

But then something wonderful happened. I met some amazing people. One lady in particular saw my potential and decided to give me a shot. A shot in the amount of my first-year’s tuition! She believed in me and in what I could achieve. Not only did she teach me English and the awesome game of Scrabble, but she taught me that there are people out there willing to help you, without wanting anything in return. Judith C. Protas made my entire academic career possible!

I applied to many colleges, including Baruch College, a well-known community college, and I got in! My declared major was computer science. I didn’t even have a computer at home!
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My college years were great. I loved academia! I loved learning new subjects and discovering new worlds. I became involved in clubs and even became an officer in the Golden Key National Honor Society, where the team of officers became my family and my advisor became my mentor. Together they made me realize that I had something to offer this world beyond sewing blankets and delivering newspapers. I grew into a person who loved and thrived in people settings. Customer relations became my thing! Talking to students and mentoring students made my heart sing. Recruiting them into Golden Key and celebrating their achievements with them gave me joy. During my junior year, I took an earth science class and became enamored with the subject. The confidence from belonging to Golden Key propelled me to find a school that offered a Geology major, and that landed me at Utah State University.

I transferred as a senior, and I became a super senior at USU. Although all of my credits transferred, my advisor told me that in respect to the Geology major I was only a freshman. Well, there was no way I was going to start from scratch, and so I switched to business.

Our lives have branches that give us opportunities for different adventures. I met my husband in Cache Valley, and soon after we had our first child. I graduated the following year with an overall GPA of 3.51. It was a year of celebration. I did it! I had graduated with a bachelor’s degree. I was the first person in my entire family to achieve this level of schooling. My momma came to my graduation and she was beyond herself. I had never seen her so proud of me. She gave me all the praise, but she didn’t realize that I couldn’t have done it without her sacrifice. She worked twice as hard so I didn’t have to.

There are many people you will encounter along your journey who will doubt you, or make you feel less because of where you came from. But for every one of those people, there are five others out there cheering for you. Focus on those who cheer for you.

— Isela Phelps

When one is a first-generation American and the first in the family to go to college, the sacrifices are many. Everyone in the family has to work so hard on many levels: language, culture, finances. It takes a community to help you. It is a win for not only the individual, but for their entire family and community of supporters.

So, when my colleague approached me in 2017 about the Master’s degree in Management Information Systems, I knew that I had to take the chance.

For two years, I went to school and worked full-time. In the very early hours of the morning, I ran my heart out so I could have the stamina to meet all of my demands during the day. During those two years, I ran a total of six marathons and ran over 3,000 miles.

My master’s degree is a culmination of a life-long dream. Formal education for people from my socioeconomic background is not a given. It is a privilege that not many of us get. I am blessed to have been given the opportunity to follow my dreams. Making my dreams a reality would not have been possible without the many sacrifices from my family: My mom, who believed in me when I was 15 and gave me the chance to enroll in high school. My grandparents, who took me in as their “pilón” and raised me when my mom left to make a better future in the United States. Without my abuelitos, I wouldn’t be the person I am today. Hard work was part of our daily life. My hubby, who cared for our children when I was studying or out running to save my mind from insanity. Knowing that my children were taken care of and provided for while I followed this crazy dream gave me peace of mind. My children, who babysat our little rainbow baby so that I could study. My 14-year old daughter, who became my helper at home. She cooked, she cleaned, and did the dishes without being asked. She simply saw that it needed to be done, and she did it. My son, who has shown me almost every day of his life what hard work and dedication looks like. My little toddler, who was barely a few months old when I enrolled in my master’s program. She brought me joy and peace whenever I needed it. Her hugs and love made every hard day at work and school disappear. And last, but not least, my community of supporters, ranging from friends to teachers to mentors.
I don’t know what the future holds for me. All I know is that if you really want something in life, you can achieve it if you put forth the work. There are many people you will encounter along your journey who will doubt you, or make you feel less because of where you came from. But for every one of those people, there are five others out there cheering for you. Focus on those who cheer for you. Most importantly, do not doubt that you can accomplish something. It may take you years to accomplish, but as long as you make progress towards that goal, you are winning in my book. Here I am, proof that you can do anything! Because if I can do it, I know you can too!

Judith, as you look down from heaven, know that your investment paid off. I didn’t fail you. You took a chance and I ran with it!