

A formula for success



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PAWSITIVE**
COASTAL STORIES WITH MORE WAG
BY GRETCHEN AMMERMAN

Though some are more complicated than others, every person in the US has a story and I was grateful when Joel Lorenzo agreed to tell me his. I met him shortly after he'd been chosen to be the keynote speaker for the 2018 graduating class from Oregon Coast Community College's GED program.

Joel moved to the US from Guatemala in 2008 to join a brother who lived here.

"Life was tough there for sure," he said. "But it was tough here too at first because I didn't speak any English, so I signed up for English as a Second Language classes at the Oregon Coast Community College."

By 2016, he had taken classes for long enough and was speaking and writing at a high enough level that a teacher recommended that Joel try to take the GED.

"I was intimidated," he said. "I hadn't gone past the 5th grade at home so I had no basic skills."

He struggled in the classes and considered dropping out, but the support he got from college staff, like GED instructor Megan Miller-Morgan, kept him from doing so.

"She said she was touched by my story and helped me with tutoring outside of class," Joel said. "We would meet at the library to work and it helped me a lot, but it actually felt like the whole college supported me."

Miller-Morgan remembers it a bit differently.

"If Joel needed extra help I gave it to him," she said, "but I don't remember specifically tutoring him because it's the kind of thing we do for all of our students. I



can tell you that we were all impressed with how hard he worked and how dedicated he was. Many GED students find English difficult even if they are native speakers, so I recognized the extra level of difficulty he would face. The GED is offered in both languages, but he wanted to do it in English and I was confident and hopeful knowing he was diligent and perseverant. Many of

our students have very difficult situations and he was no different but he was able to structure his life so that he had stellar attendance."

Joel's situation included raising one of his two daughters on his own.

"I became a single parent because I care for my daughters and try to do everything I can to keep them safe from any bad

situation," he said. "It was really hard becoming a mother and father at the same time, I'm not really sure how I did it and school too."

Working at a fish plant at the time, Joel would share his dreams of going forward with his education.

"My coworkers would say, 'You're dreaming,' and laugh at me," he said. "Luckily, the support I didn't get from them, I got at the college."

By 2017, Joel was improving in his GED classes enough that he tried some practice tests and found he was in the passing range.

"The first real test I took was for social studies," he said. "When we found out I had passed it my teacher almost cried, which made me almost cry."

Buoyed by that success, he tried the science test and passed that too. Next was math, and though he didn't pass the first time, math was his favorite subject, so he felt confident trying again.

He passed.

And then he found his nemesis.

"I was starting to get in a rush to graduate but couldn't pass English so I didn't make it," he said. "It was really hard on my confidence."

Then his instructors told him about a program offered at OCCC called CG100, College and Success.

"Joel took advantage of a program that all students that are taking the GED program can use," Miller-Morgan said. "It helps students take full advantage of what the college has to offer and helps set them up for success."

Though still feeling some insecurity, Joel threw himself into the program and earned an A.

"That opened doors for me and really helped me with my confidence," he said. "So I gave the GED another shot."

When he finished, he was so nervous about passing that he was afraid to check his score. When he finally did, the first word he saw was "Congratulations."

Joel is continuing to attend classes at the OCCC, focusing on his favorite subject: math.

"When I was in the GED classes I saw how many students struggled with it," he said. "I would like to become a math tutor and eventually maybe even a math teacher. I really want to help other students in the way I was helped; I want to pay back what I was given."