The Only Impossible Journey
Is the One You Never Begin

--by Angela Rodriguez
Going to a community college played a key role in how my life developed after moving to the United States.

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Socrates once said “the secret of change is to focus all of your energy, not on fighting the old, but on building the new.” I didn’t want to leave my home country of Peru. Not because I didn’t like the United States but because I was afraid. I was leaving everything behind. I was leaving my job, my school, my friends, part of me… Or that’s what I thought! Even though I couldn’t see it at the beginning, now I realize that moving to the United States was just a part of my journey. A journey that is bringing new and exciting things to my life! One of the events that played a key role in this journey was studying at a community college.

I was born in Lima, Peru. My parents say that I was a very talkative child.
They say I would talk to almost anybody for hours and about anything! This is true even now. They always made it clear to me that the path to succeed was education. Since I was a child, they encouraged me to excel in school and always motivated me to read and expand my knowledge. I’m the oldest of four children. We all grew up in Lima. It was not an easy life. Because my father couldn’t go to college and didn’t have a professional degree, he had to work long hours as a bus driver without a decent salary. I remember seeing him only on Sundays because he would work Monday through Saturday from 5am to 11 pm. My father is a good man. My father is the kindest and most hardworking man I’ve ever known. I am very proud of him and I feel that everything I am is partially thanks to him and his example of honesty and hard work.

As I was saying, it was not an easy life... my father worked long hours and my mother stayed at home because she was sick most of the time. She is a very strong woman. She is a preschool teacher but hasn’t worked in years because of two reasons. First, she decided to raise her children and spend time with us since my father was never home. Second, she had a difficult pregnancy with my youngest brother and after that her health started to deteriorate. Among other ailments, she has rheumatoid arthritis and the pain is awful. I’ve seen her crying without her knowing; she tried to be strong for us and always had a smile on her face but I’ve seen her crying like a little baby. I’ve seen my father hugging her as hard as he could as if he was trying to take her pain away. I love my parents. They always care about me, even now that I am a grown-up woman. They taught me some important things... They taught me that family always comes first and when people love each other, they stay together even through difficult times. They also taught me that I can be whoever I want only if I believe and work hard for it. I firmly believe that one crucial step to have more opportunities of succeeding in life is education. Not only because it gets you a degree but because it broadens our perspective and makes us think about things that we may have not considered otherwise.

Because life in Lima was not that easy and getting a decent salary was harder and harder every year, my parents decided to move to the United States. My mother’s sister had been living in Connecticut for more than twenty years and she wanted her family to be together so she sponsored us. First, she sponsored her parents and then her three sisters and their families. How it happened was a quick and unexpected. She had sent the paperwork ten years before we were granted permanent residency. We even forgot we were queueing to get the precious green card! I was 21 and happy. I was going to school and majoring in Psychology, which I always
loved! I had a job that I loved: teaching. I was a teacher assistant at a private school and I must say that things were going well for me. I had friends, I was in love, I was becoming independent and helping my family with my salary... I was happy! But all of the sudden, my mother told me that everything was finally ready and we should be moving to the United States in four months maximum. I’d even forgotten that we were planning on moving! I didn’t want to move! I didn’t want to leave my school, my job, my friends... But I had to because “family always stays together.” I was hard! I remember I cried for about a week because I didn’t want to move. I didn’t want to leave everything behind. I was afraid of not fitting in but even more important, I was afraid of not being able to study. In Peru, we have some public universities in which you only pay around 100-200 soles per year (about $30-$60). I knew that education in the United States was extremely expensive, especially for a family who had zero savings. Plus, classes were 100% in English and my English level was very low. I was very sad because I really wanted to go to school and thought that it was over for me. My father talked to me before flying and I remember almost his exact words “don’t be silly. Be strong. I want to see you smile! You will go to school again, I promise... I promise I’ll work 24 hours if I have to but you and your siblings will be better than me. You have to.” He hugged me and I cried. That moment, I realized that I was being selfish and childish. I realized that it was even harder on him because he felt responsible of us leaving the country. Some years after we moved, we talked again and he told me that the first year in Connecticut was very hard because he felt that he failed as a father. My siblings and I were working and not studying. We were trying to help with the expenses and also saving money to go to school. My father said that he felt he failed because he saw how our lives changed in a short period of time. He saw how difficult it was to make friends. In fact, I wasn’t able to make friends since I was working or studying and had no free time. He was also sad because he couldn’t speak English and couldn’t aim for a better job or talk to people and make some friends.

And we moved to Connecticut. It was such a huge change in all aspects. I grew up in the city with lots of noise and people; Vernon was a very quiet place. I was very friendly and talkative but not anymore since I was very busy and couldn’t communicate that well. We used to live in a small house with no commodities; now we even had air conditioning, heater! Food was a little different... I cannot still get used to the different taste of fruits, vegetables, and meat. And finally, cold! Lima is a warm city so winter was around 14C but here was snowing all the time! Oh snow!
remember the very first time that I threw myself to a huge mountain of snow. It was a priceless feeling! I used to love snow… until I started walking at 7am to go to work! It was freezing and I kind of hated snow!

The first year I lived in Connecticut, I worked two jobs and had no social life or whatsoever. I needed to save for school. I was also learning English and helping my parents with their cleaning jobs. My father had four different jobs, two of them consisted of cleaning some offices. Me and my sister used to go with him and help him out so he could have more time to rest. One thing that I love about being in the States is that now I see my father more often. Even though he works very hard and has more than one job, we can have lunch or dinner together sometimes and we can spend some time together during the weekend.

To be honest, after working for nine months I resigned to the fact that school had to wait. I didn’t feel confident enough to speak and write in English and I didn’t have enough money to pay for tuition. But, sometimes destiny knows better…

I came across with Manchester Community College and soon I knew that going to school was still possible for me. Talking to some people, I realized that I could lower my tuition by taking classes there first and then transferring to a bigger university to obtain my Bachelor’s Degree. I decided to apply to MCC and pursued an Associate’s Degree in Liberal Arts and Science. I have to say that I was very surprised. My English improved a lot and every day I was more confident of speaking in front of the class. Professors there were very supportive and always open to questions; they always encouraged students to utilize office hours and get the help they needed. I was one of those students that always goes to ask questions about the course and stays there one hour talking about everything. Even now, I still visit some of my Professors sometimes. I am very grateful to all the Professors that made such a big impact on me; not only for sharing their knowledge and broadening my perspective in several subjects, but also to those who were very supportive and always encouraged me to continue pushing myself to the limits. Those who believed in me even when I didn’t.

Going to a community college played a key role in how my life developed after moving to the United States. I was able to get quality education at an affordable price, but even more important … I felt that I was important. People at a community college cared about students and tried...
to help them succeed and achieve their goals. Classes were small and I benefit from it because Professors had more time to clarify doubts and offer extra help.

Moreover, you could meet such a diverse group of students there, which make classes even more interesting by having such a variety of perspectives. I met people who just graduated from high school, adults who were returning to school after more than 20 years, parents balancing work, home, and studies, and immigrants like me. This diversity makes a community college unique.

There were some Professors at MCC that made a huge impact on me. One of them was my Psychology Professor. She was a special lady. She had a warm smile and always made us feel comfortable in class. Her classes were a little dense as she always made us think beyond the textbook, which I appreciated! She always made classes interesting and was open to discussions and constructive critique of different theoretical perspective. Best of all, she was always welcoming when students needed help or just wanted to talk a little bit. I always went to her office and we talked about Psychology. She was caring and invested on her students’ success. She was not only a teacher to me but also a mentor because she helped me when I had doubts about applying to University and always encouraged me. She even helped me by answering some questions I had about different schools, programs, and how higher education works in the United States. A very passionate woman who loved her field but even loved more to teach! I am very grateful to MCC because it helped me improve my English skills, it provided me with quality education at an affordable price, and Professors and staff were always supportive. I think that going to that college was one of the best decisions I made because it gave me the necessary baseline to start and continue pursuing higher education. After graduating from MCC, I continued my education at Central Connecticut State University and I majored in Psychology. The transition was smooth as I could transfer all the courses I took at MCC but I have to admit that classes were a little different. Professors were good but they weren’t that close to students as those at MCC. Classes were bigger and I felt intimidated because I didn’t want to speak in front of 40 students. However, I enjoyed all my classes and I did well. I graduated on 2015 and obtain a G.P.A of 4.0, which I am very proud of.

My education at CCSU reaffirmed my desire to continue studying and learning more. After graduation, I knew that I wanted to go to graduate school. But first I needed to save some money to pay for it!

After graduation, I worked for a year as a preschool teacher and as a costumer representative in a local gym. It was a nice year because I was working and spending more time with my family. I also travelled to Europe for three months and explored new cities. It was
the first I went to Europe and I loved every part of it!

I felt the freedom walking with my huge backpack and visiting new places and meeting new people. It was a priceless experience. And then, it happened… I said to myself that I needed to move again and it was not a crazy idea to study abroad.

I decided to apply for graduate school in a European University. I already applied to Belgium and I am waiting for their decision and I will apply to a University in Spain in April, when the admission process begins. I want to study Educational or Organizational Psychology and do some research. Hopefully, I'll start classes this August! (if I get accepted!).

In the meantime, I am living in London. During my Euro trip, I felt in love with the city and I had the opportunity to study here for a couple of months. I'm training to be an ESL teacher. I am working on my CELTA qualification now. This will allow me to teach English to speakers of other languages at an entry level. This is something I'll love to do as I am a former ESL student myself and I know how difficult and exciting it can be to learn a new language. Hopefully, I'll be able to start teaching after I obtain my certificate! Classes are a little intense but they are very interesting and so far I am getting positive feedback after my practices teaching students.

I know my journey is not over yet. I keep working hard to achieve my goals. I'm studying now and still looking for good graduate programs. My journey as an adult has taken me from Peru, to the U.S., to London and I must say that so much of it began at a community college.