COVID-19 Gave Me a Second Chance

Erendira Hernandez
eeh166@humboldt.edu
Although a little embarrassed, I feel the need to tell my story. It may contain a huge lesson for other people. Furthermore, it is probably one of the few good things resulting from the pandemic.

I started attending Humboldt State University in the fall of 2011 and “graduated” in fall 2016. I walked the stage a semester early because I discovered if you do not graduate in May you do not get to walk on stage and my family wanted to see me walk on stage and celebrate graduation with me. The following semester, I thought I had completed the final requirements for my bachelor’s degree. My family and friends were so proud of me. As a first-generation Guatemalan-American, I managed to be the first person in my family to graduate college. And I did it while working, being a full-time student, and raising my daughter as a single mother.

Finishing my bachelor’s degree has been an incredible bright spot for me during the pandemic. If not for COVID-19, I may never have completed my BA. I am grateful for the online infrastructure and support systems that made it possible. I am also thrilled to be able to model success in the face of obstacles for my daughter, Olivia, who has taught me what is possible when hard work meets optimism because she is thriving with Arthritis and Autism.

Quarantine has taught me so much about being present, being grateful for good health, opportunities to travel, learn, and connect with other humans. Most of all, this strange time in history has taught me to take moments as they happen, never quit, gather myself and coil my strength so I can spring forward. The pandemic has taught me never to give up—it is never too late to try again. My ultimate hope is that others like me will also be able to return and finish what they started, that HSU will reimagine access to higher education and retain the online options for students with stories like mine.

COVID-19 Gave Me a Second Chance

Erendira “Elly” Hernandez

Although a little embarrassed, I feel the need to tell my story. It may contain a huge lesson for other people. Furthermore, it is probably one of the few good things resulting from the pandemic.

I started attending Humboldt State University in the fall of 2011 and “graduated” in fall 2016. I walked the stage a semester early because I discovered if you do not graduate in May you do not get to walk on stage and my family wanted to see me walk on stage and celebrate graduation with me. The following semester, I thought I had completed the final requirements for my bachelor’s degree. My family and friends were so proud of me. As a first-generation Guatemalan-American, I managed to be the first person in my family to graduate college. And I did it while working, being a full-time student, and raising my daughter as a single mother.

Girls Just Wanna Have Sun: Elly and her daughter Lilith share a beautiful day at a beach south of North Cove, Washington.
Future So Bright: Elly and Lilith look pretty cool in shades.

About a week after graduation, I packed up and moved to Aberdeen, Washington, to be closer to my family. I landed a great job as a quality control analyst for Ocean Gold Seafood Companies, and everything fell into place. After two years at that position, I decided I wanted a career change. I feel somewhat silly admitting this, but after two years, I realized that I had never received my diploma. When you are busy with a child and a full-time job, life just takes over. I thought, “It’s just a piece of paper. I walked the stage. I graduated.” There was no doubt in my mind that I had finished.

Well, it turns out I had not graduated.

As I discovered, I had failed a class and another class did not double count toward general education requirements. Holy guacamole with a side of fudge berries! The lesson here is twofold:

1. Do not move hundreds of miles away until absolutely sure you have graduated.
2. Talk to your academic, major, and minor advisors to make sure that the classes you take fulfill the right requirements. All the requirements.

I was missing six units. Only six units short of earning my diploma. Horse pucky!

So, I reached out to Dr. Matthew Derrick, chair of the Department of Geography, Environment, and Spatial Analysis, in May 2019 and informed him of my situation. He was shocked. He, along with my other professors, thought I had graduated years earlier. I went ahead and quit my good-paying job for temporary employment, waiting to move to Arcata and complete my BA in Geography at HSU. However, I later found out that my financial aid package for the following semester would not be sufficient for me to return to Humboldt County. To put it mildly, I was disappointed. Trying to save money as a single mother is very tough. Saving at least two months of rent, plus a deposit, and the $2,000 for tuition not covered by financial aid seemed impossible. I did not know how I would ever be able to return and complete my degree.

Then the pandemic hit. I learned that most universities were changing their courses to online classes. I phoned HSU’s Office of Admissions, asking if it would be possible to complete my coursework online even though I lived in Washington. In reply, I heard the greatest word in the English language: “Yes.” It has been a long journey. Having finally completed my degree requirements, I cannot express my happiness! I, Erendira Elizabeth Hernandez—for real this time—graduated from HSU with a bachelor’s degree in Geography and a minor in Environmental and Natural Resources Planning.

It is never too late to follow your dream.