

AGAINST THE ODDS

BY DANIELA RODRIGUEZ



Photo Credit: Daniela Rodriguez

There was nothing new to me about being First Generation aside from the struggle of having the name, “First Generation”. Now, I want to preface this by saying that being first-generation is not a term of constant struggles. It’s a term that comes with a lot of baggage and must be handled with perseverance in mind. Nonetheless, the struggles will seem never-ending at times. The term “First Generation” appeared to me when I first arrived at my university, but the struggles I faced began before setting foot on campus.

FAFSA was a nightmare to fill out alone, the fear of any single mistake on that form marked the beginning of my collegiate journey. From having to learn how to read tax transcripts to constantly

reminding your parents to sign FAFSA forms was exhausting for someone who had no one to rely on in terms of the college experience. To this day, the fear and anxiety creep in as FAFSA season approaches—signifying the overwhelming process.

Following high school graduation, the excitement started to bubble for my upcoming journey. A journey that hasn’t been traveled, a path that I am creating while building myself up at the same time. Excitement soon crumbled down when my mom’s health took a turn. She went from a healthy mom trying to help her daughter with dorm decorations, to fighting for her life on a hospital bed.

Suddenly, my priorities were no longer to succeed in college but to be there for my mom by helping her

take care of my little brother. My mom fought for her life for a few weeks before deciding to move back to her home in Mexico, in the city of Monterrey, Nuevo León for the time being with my brother. I was worried but amidst her illness, she encouraged me to not leave college to take care of her.

— She would often tell me “Mija, quiero que te vayas, quiero que seas alguien,” to convince me to not end my college journey before it even started. Her words of encouragement in the end worked as I decided to continue to go off to my new chapter in life: college.

Luckily enough, my mom was getting better and was able to come back home to Uvalde, Texas, to help me pack up and move in at Texas State University. I was thrilled! My mom was getting better and I was doing something amazing being the first in my family to go to college. The excitement continued as I dorm shopped and searched Amazon up and down for the perfect decorations because my experience had to be perfect. It had to be like in the movies where students moved into their dorms and became best friends with their roommates.

— I wanted and expected it to be perfect.

— I later realized my experience wasn't going to be all sunshine and daisies. I would see my mom's bags on her nightstand filled with necessary medication like her blood pressure monitor, and her glucose level testing kit. I would see her sitting and doing her daily routine and a feeling of guilt in my heart settled in. I would also see my dad's work bag on the floor and look at the way his face contorted in pain as he rubbed his back due to all the extra hours he had been putting in work to be able to provide for hospital bills, doctor visits and for us.

This feeling of guilt seemed to sink into my heart and take a permanent spot that stays here to this day. Tears sprung to my eyes.

It was now a space lacking the love and exuberance that used to spill through the cracks of the windows and the crevices of the house itself. While the tears spilled, I did my best to keep a smile on my face as I was moving into my dorm and had a good day with my family. Time flew and the night was creeping in, and the goodbyes came.

**“HOW COULD I LEAVE
AND EXPECT TO GO LIVE
A PERFECT COLLEGE LIFE
WHEN MY HOME WASN'T
EVEN HOME ANYMORE?”**

“Si se puede mija,” both of my parents reminded me before having to leave. The tearful goodbyes were hard, but the feeling that followed was probably the hardest.

It wasn't like the movies. I sat on my twin XL bed and stared at the floor wanting nothing more than to call my parents to come pick me up. I didn't want to be here starting a new chapter in my life when the previous chapter was up in flames.

However, I was reminded of what my mom and dad told me: “Si se puede.”

So, my motivation reignited, and I was determined to do my best to one day help my parents retire.

School started and it was like I was a fish out of water. I felt so small on a campus so large. Still, I was determined to succeed. I attended classes and was doing well for the first two weeks until my mom got sick again. This time it was worse. I panicked and did my best to balance my life at school and at home. I went to school Mondays through Fridays, went back home to Uvalde on Friday nights and would go back Sunday nights.

I had no time for myself and started to fall behind in my classes. This pattern continued throughout the semester; ultimately leading me to fail two of my classes while barely passing the other ones. I was disappointed in myself. I was in a dark hole with no way out, and as the next semester followed, I still managed to fail one class. I was a biology major at the time, so these failing grades were hard hitters on my self-esteem and eventually led to having imposter syndrome.



Illustration by: Riana Tovar

I didn't feel like I belonged on campus. I felt like I was taking someone else's rightful spot and I was just a fake. As my mom's sickness progressed, my lack of motivation and the feeling of being lost progressed as well. I knew being a biology major wasn't what I wanted, but I was looking for something that could lead me to good money for my parents. Eventually, I decided to switch over to being a political science major in the fall of 2020, and while I liked it, I also felt that I didn't love it.

I was still having to go back and forth from San Marcos to Uvalde to take care of my mom, which inevitably, led me to fail classes again. I was convincing myself that God was punishing me for leaving home when my home needed me most. I convinced myself so well that I decided to move back home in October 2020. I still did classes, but now I was home taking care of my mom and my brother while my dad worked. This worked for me until May of 2021 came around and my mom's health deteriorated. That's when I decided to take a step back from university entirely.

I didn't know what I was going to do with my life, but at that moment nothing else mattered. My family needed me and I was going to be there.

Unfortunately, in July of 2021, I suffered the greatest loss of my mom. My best friend. I was distraught, but I had no time to process what just happened because my little brother needed me. I was to take care of him while my dad worked out of town, so as the year progressed, I took some classes at the junior college in Uvalde. I mainly focused on

my brother and work during this time. Life continued this way until my brother graduated and I knew that he was going to be okay with my dad.

I moved to San Antonio, Texas, and I had time to reflect on myself and what it was that I wanted to do with my life. I was always so busy putting others before me that I never asked myself what it was that I wanted to do. The answer is that I'm still figuring it out and that's okay.

There's so much projection surrounding first-generation students. There's the fear of contributing to the 40 percent of First Generation "dropouts". There's the expectation to be the best and the need to succeed without failure because one misfire can cost us everything. The truth is that failing all those times led me to where I am now. A student who knows she's passionate about writing. A student who used to lay in bed crying thinking she would never succeed in college or that she would go back at all. A student who is getting her class ring this November. A student who will be the first to graduate in her family next year in 2024.

There is so much more than what meets the naked eye of a first-generation student. To some, it's just a title that might imply that their college life is or will be different than others, but it goes beyond that. The weight we carry is the pain and suffering from past generations and the need to succeed rises. We hold the tools needed to carve out a new path for our future generations and those are the hardest tools to use as each shoveling is engrained with countless feelings of guilt and tears, but we are the beginning of something new.





Photo Credit: Daniela Rodriguez

**WE ARE AMAZING. WHENEVER YOU FEEL
LIKE YOU DON'T BELONG HERE OR LIKE YOU
CAN'T DO THIS. JUST REMEMBER,
SI SE PUEDE!**