**Esmeralda Leija: Designing a Career in Architecture**

**Building Her Future**

**Esmeralda Leija: Designing Woman**

With her Associate degree from South Texas College in hand, Esmeralda Leija recently moved from the comfortable familiarity of the Valley to an apartment in Houston. McAllen is only about 350 miles from Houston, but for Esmeralda Leija, it’s been an exciting a journey getting from here to there, where she is enrolled at the University of Houston. It’s a road she couldn’t have traveled without South Texas College.

“I really believe the College has given me the tools I need to carry on with this journey of mine,” says Leija, who admits to being a little nervous and overwhelmed at the changes in her life over the past couple of months. After earning an Associate degree, she’s now working toward a Bachelor’s degree in architecture with a minor in energy and sustainability.

She didn’t know it at the time, but her father’s work in construction inspired her to begin this journey. As a young girl, she would visit him at work. “I’d go on job sites with him and was amazed by his work. I loved seeing the modern homes, how the space was laid out. It really caught my attention.”

Leija graduated among the top 10 in her high school class and had her pick of several universities. But her mother became ill and Leija, the youngest of four, decided to stay home with her family and do her studies at South Texas College. Though she had a love for design and drawing, she hadn’t considered a career in architecture at first.

“I thought I would go into business, but that was not really my passion,” she says. Fortunately, an advisor suggested she complete an Associate degree in interdisciplinary studies to explore her options. Shortly thereafter, she became aware of the South Texas College Architectural and Engineering Design Technologies program.

After one introductory class, she was hooked. “That was it! I knew then that’s what I wanted to pursue,” she says.

Once she entered the architectural program, Leija says she “received help like I never have before. My teachers were so supportive. They really believed I would be an architect. When someone supports your dreams and believes in you, it really means a lot.” Leija earned her Associate degree in 2015 and then received certifications in architectural and visual technology as well as architectural and engineering design.

An important factor in student success is often the relationships formed between students and teachers. When Leija was starting her architectural studies, she came to the attention of Program Chair Sara Lozano, who had an open work study position. The two quickly forged a bond that continues to this day.

“Esmer really set the bar high,” remembers Lozano, speaking of the hours Leija worked in the office. “She’s organized and a great student, plus she was eager to learn more. She became part of the team quickly, and would jump in with suggestions. Not only is she talented, she was willing to do presentations, speak to middle school students, and take it upon herself to learn how to use any new programs or equipment we had so she could teach others.”

**Essential Experience in Technical Skills**

Lozano has been at South Texas College for 13 years, and in that time the program has undergone some major changes.

“We began by focusing on computer-aided draft and design,” she says. “But we realized that students were interested in architecture, so in 2016 we added classes that give them what they need to transfer to a Bachelor’s program in architecture should they desire to do so.”

One of the ways South Texas College addresses the more extensive needs of the transfer-friendly program is by providing the students with new state-of-the-art equipment. One example is their advanced virtual reality 3D modeling software. Students use it to turn their drawings into virtual 3D spaces that others can “walk” through and explore.

“Even local firms don’t always do this with their drawings,” says Lozano. “We felt it was necessary for students to get ahead of the curve. They have the drafting skills required, and now they can bring something new and innovative to the table.”

“When I got out of school, I didn’t have any of the technical skills we are giving these students,” admits Lozano, who graduated from Yale University’s architectural program.

Lozano and other faculty members are making sure students in the program get as much experience as possible. Leija, for example, worked as a lab assistant. She helped other students with programs including AutoCAD and Revit, worked with the 3D printer and other equipment, and assisted staff and faculty with various projects.

Because of this, Leija was able to land drafting jobs with two firms in the area. This gave her a wealth of experience with the production of construction documents, schematic designs, renderings, 3D models, and weekly field reports. Leija also worked on important collaborative projects with other venues.

One such project came about when Leija was selected as one of four students to collaborate with Mexico’s Instituto Technologico de Reynosa. Their challenge was to design an atrium renovation at the South Texas College Technology Campus.

“We worked in teams to create a design proposal. It taught me so much about how others learn and process information. Together, we had to analyze the problem, collect ideas, and present a model to an audience.”

It was Lozano and the faculty at South Texas College that recommended Leija for her most recent position, a seven-month internship with Negrete & Kolar Architects. “Since she’s left, they’ve requested that we send them ‘someone else like Esmeralda,’” says Lozano.

**Moving on Up**

“The school has been so important to me,” says Leija. “It’s the reason I’ve had the experience I’ve had. My teachers motivated me. They pushed me. These projects, my work study, and my position as a lab assistant all had a huge impact on me.”

As for Lozano, she says she couldn’t be more proud of Leija, and she’s eager to watch as her future unfolds. “I understand that it’s hard for her family to let her go to Houston, and it really is a big deal for Esmer to leave the Valley. But she’s got a whole lot of potential, and it’s the only way she could achieve her dreams. There’s nothing stopping her!”