**South Texas College**

November 2019 News Center: Noe Cienfuegos article

***‘Broke, but together’:* STC experience fuels holiday hope for Cienfuegos family**

Tripping pipe for 12 hours on an oil rig can drain you, both physically and emotionally. Do it for two weeks straight, on the road, as the typical derrickman does, and you’ve more than earned the proud title of “roughneck.”

This was Noe Cienfuegos’s life. Leaving town every month to check pumps and run shaker screens. Throwing and latching fast-moving, impossibly heavy pipe. Collapsing into camp every evening sapped of every possible muscle fiber and electrolyte.

Then, suddenly, life got harder.

His wife’s health, precarious since her teenage years due to diabetes, took a turn for the worse. Her kidneys shut down, and she began to lose her vision, eventually losing sight completely in her right eye. She began hemodialysis, but the symptoms proved too severe, necessitating a transition to the more complex peritoneal dialysis.

“The unknown will kick you in your knees…and then once you’re on all fours, will kick you in your throat to finish you off,” reflects Cienfuegos, father to an 8-year-old son. “And that is what scared me.”

The new dialysis procedure required a monitor to operate the machines intermittently, throughout the day and night. Cienfuegos was faced with a choice.

“I had to choose to leave work to take care of her or leave her [alone] to continue working and making money,” Cienfuegos recalls. “And, well, now we’re broke, but together.”

Cienfuegos and his wife lost *almost* everything. A tough but lucrative paycheck that had provided $80,000-plus in annual earnings became $13,000, doing “pretty much anything that I can work around my schedule.” Unable to work a regular shift due to his healthcare duties at home, he began making ends meet doing caterings—he’s something of a BBQ-savant—landscaping, and mechanic work.

“She’s needed…doctors and procedures that the insurance doesn’t pay for,” says Cienfuegos. “So, it’s like I need to pay for this treatment but I also need gas money.

“So…I’ll hustle and get that gas money.”

Cienfuegos wasn’t about to let the unknown finish him off. Inspired by a South Texas College TV commercial, the gears started turning, and he began to develop a long-term plan: turn his innate tech-savvy into a computer science degree, find a job near enough to see his wife and son every day, and earn enough money to hire a home healthcare worker.

The day he stepped foot on the South Texas College campus, Cienfuegos felt something he hadn’t experienced in some time, amid his tumultuous life: a sense of *hope*.

Though older than the typical college student, Cienfuegos found a welcoming home at South Texas College, connecting with classmates, engaging with instructors, and finding support through the Center for Learning Excellence. With the guidance of his STC professors, he set off on the path to a Computer and Network Specialist degree, and even won an exclusive scholarship to help him on the way.

“I received a scholarship that I had no idea existed if it wasn’t for my professors,” he recalls. “If it wasn’t for them, I would’ve never applied and wouldn’t have gotten blessed with such an honor.

“All the professors are there to help and ensure you graduate.”

It hasn’t been easy. At one point, his wife suffered a stroke as the delayed result of a triple-bypass, losing her speech and movement on the right side of her body. This left Cienfuegos and his family desperate for a good sign—*any* sign—that things were destined to improve.

That sign came the day that Cienfuegos told his wife he was nominated for the scholarship. Previously unable to muster any words other than “they,” his wife’s vocabulary suddenly included the word “wow,” and with that barrier broken, would soon expand further. Restless one night, Cienfuegos got up to check his email, and everything changed.

“I found out I won the scholarship,” he recalls. “She was awake too, so I said ‘do you want to know some good news?’ and she nodded yes, and I told her. She then said, ‘good.’”

It was progress. But when he returned to the hospital from class the next day, he *really* began to believe in the power of positivity.

“When I got back in the afternoon, she was a God-sent new person,” remembers Cienfuegos. “More alive and very responsive, saying more words. I [was] so amazed.

“Somehow the good news triggered something in her brain and she has been astonishing everyone. That was when I said: ‘this is cool and needs to continue.’”

Already determined to make a better life for his family, that incident connected the dots for Cienfuegos, providing a much-needed boost to the spirit. Now his South Texas College studies were more than a component of a personal dream. Now his academic successes represented an engine of inspiration, to sustain both his wife’s outlook and his personal drive.

“It’s like, if I quit, she quits,” says Cienfuegos. “So as long as I keep fighting for a better future, she will keep fighting for that next breath with us.”

Cienfuegos draws strength from his South Texas College education, seeing it not only as a path to a brighter future, but as a way of occupying his mind and spirit during a turbulent present. While working on his Computer and Network Specialist degree, he discovered STC’s restaurant management courses, and realized that with the right foundation, his formidable barbecue skills could someday translate to a successful small business.

“[Noe] reminds me that ordinary persons become extraordinary when they encounter struggles that can be overcome through love of family, faith, positive foundations, and a desire to strive for the best,” says South Texas College Trustee Dr. Alejo Salinas, Jr. “It is up to the individual to chart the course that leads to success regardless of trials and tribulations. No obstacle is greater or more powerful than the sum total of the effort that individuals exert to overcome them.

“South Texas College provided Noe Cienfuegos with opportunities to embark on a journey of success,” Salinas says. “He is a testament to his family and community demonstrating that all things are possible. He is commended for his accomplishments, sacrifices, and perseverance. The team that provided him with the opportunity to ‘Experience Excellence’ is also acknowledged; thanks to the faculty, advisors, administrators, support staff, and a supportive Board of Trustees for providing opportunities for success. All is possible and it starts at STC.”

Cienfuegos says his plan after he gets his degree is to work and be a leader, “… and get paid sufficient money so that I can hire someone to do my wife’s treatments.”

“[Then] I can focus on starting up my own business so that I can provide a great life for my family.”

**‘Broke, but together.’**

For all of the adversity that Cienfuegos and his family have faced in recent years, this holiday season represents a time of optimism. Even as daily, life-and-death challenges persist, hope and higher education are providing the Cienfuegos family a light at the end of the tunnel. And for Noe, that’s a blessing.

“These holidays will definitely make me reflect on these crazy years,” he ruminates. “My 8-year-old asked what I wanted for Christmas, and I said ‘for mommy to get better’ and he replied ‘yeah, I don’t want toys, just for mommy to get better too.’”

“That tore me up.”

*[BREAKOUT BOX]:*

***STC’s Computer Information Systems program opens doors!***

Computer Network Support Specialist: **$69,190** average salary in Texas

Network and Computer Systems Administrator: **$84,640**

Web Developer: **$70,630**

Information Security Analyst: **$100,490**

Applications Developer: **$108,490**

*Relevant hashtags: #computerinformationsystems #SouthtTexasCollege #STC #computer #technology #tech #pc #informationtechnology #IT #innovation #education #science #business #information*