**South Texas College**

News Center

**From Dropout to Doctorate: Exceptional Faculty and Alumna Dr. Anna B. Alaniz**

“Girls where I come from don’t get doctorate degrees,” says Anna B. Alaniz. She was born in Starr County during the early 70s…but *just barely.*

Her father sold everything he owned so that their family could emigrate from Mexico, and Anna could be born in the United States. “If you would have told me…that I was going to get a Master’s and doctorate, and I was going to be a professor at South Texas College, I would have probably laughed!” says Alaniz.

But Alaniz—now *Dr.* Alaniz—is a fighter. Having overcome tremendous hurdles to achieve a doctoral degree, she’s now inspiring the next generation of Starr County students to follow their dreams, too.

“I dropped out of high school at 16, got married at 17, and had my first child at 18,” says Alaniz. Back then, she says, women were expected to get married and raise children—but not necessarily have careers. On top of that, the nearest university was an hour and a half drive away, and at the time, “that wasn’t feasible.”

She lived in Houston for 10 years while she raised her children, and when her family returned to Starr County, she encountered a life-changing surprise.

“There was this new college, which didn’t have a campus,” Alaniz recalls. “It was South Texas College!”

The rest was the stuff of STC legend. Alaniz enrolled in 1998, and after completing 60+ credits at the College, she finished her undergraduate work and went on to earn her Bachelor’s degree in just three years.

“I don’t even think STC held graduations back then,” says Alaniz, who recalls some classes at that time being held in laundromats. She was able to take night classes at Roma High School, and after a while, learned she could take morning classes at a more convenient—and unlikely—location.

“They started offering classes in Fort Ringgold, which was like an old army fort,” remembers Alaniz, who also recalls unique challenges at the site, including the lack of air conditioning. “In the summers, it would get really hot, and our professor would give us a break to get snow cones across the street so we could make it through the afternoon.”

By the time she took her final course, however, STC had built the beautiful Starr County Campus, and Alaniz took full advantage of the new facilities. After graduating, she transferred to UT-RGV (then UT-PA) and commuted 90 minutes twice a week to attend her Master’s classes. She graduated with honors, cum laude, and eventually returned to her beloved South Texas College to teach.

“I taught in the same classroom where I took classes,” she says. “It always held sentimental value because I had been a student there.”

Alaniz knew she wanted to become an instructor ever since her very first semester at STC. However, she quickly found that it would take more than a strong connection to achieve her dream.

“It’s funny, but I applied [to South Texas College] for about two-and-a-half years, every single semester,” says Alaniz. “I would apply for anything I thought I was capable of teaching, until one day, I got an interview!”

That’s when Dr. Alaniz finally landed her dream job, teaching at the same Starr County Campus where she fell in love with her college and vocation in the first place.

“We’re still a rural community, and we don’t have a lot of people in our community with doctoral degrees,” explains Alaniz, who says she is proud to be a living example that things can change. “For our students to see somebody from the community, a migrant student, a poor student…and then to be here for them. I allow my students to dream that anything is possible.”

After working at STC for around three years, Dr. Alaniz was invited to be a part of the *Ascender* program. A partnership between the College and the nonprofit Catch the Next, *Ascender* provides academic, emotional, and community support for Latinx and other underserved community college students.

The project’s goals matched everything Alaniz was already doing in her classroom, but *Ascender* “gave it a name.” She started as the mentor coordinator, and began teaching in the program the following year. Soon, she was working directly with students for an entire semester at a time. But she was called to go even further.

“I started to think how cool would it be if I could be their developmental instructor *and* their English 1301 instructor as well,” remembers Alaniz.

That’s when she decided to go back to school, determined to do more for her students.

Initially, she began working on a second Master’s degree in English. But when she was recruited by Texas A&M-Kingsville to pursue a doctoral degree instead, she decided to take the plunge. She applied, got accepted, and graduated with her degree three years later.

Now, she is able to teach *all* the components of the *Ascender* program, allowing her even more opportunities to promote student success. On top of teaching, Dr. Alaniz also coordinates the *Ascender* program for STC’s three major campuses.

“I have about 50 to 75 students in a given semester,” says Alaniz. But as a whole, “we usually serve anywhere from 150 to 200 students a semester.”

In addition to taking students on university tours, the program attends an annual motivational conference at the University of Texas-Austin. Dr. Alaniz takes about 30 students every year, who get to experience dorm life for three days and connect with groups from other colleges.

“Most of our students are first-generation college attendees,” Alaniz explains. “They don’t have that person to teach them the college culture, so they get that from us, from the instructors.”

Dr. Alaniz goes the extra mile by providing students with her personal cell phone number. Whether it's about the library’s hours or the start date for her class, Alaniz always texts back, knowing that many of her students do not have internet access.

She keeps in touch with her former students as well, including an alumna who not only presented at the conference, but also recently got a new job.

“I knew it was her first week. I sent her a message, and I said, ‘How did it go?’” They chatted, and upon offering her support and advice, the student replied, “I want you to know that in great part, I am who I am because of you.”

“That makes everything I do every single day worthwhile,” says Alaniz.

One thing the STC superstar learned from her dissertation is that it is possible to overcome the research that shows that children are more likely to obtain a college education if their parents have degrees. Dr. Alaniz did not have that advantage from her parents, and she remains interested in how students like her can beat the odds.

“My dad…would always say, ‘the only inheritance I am going to leave you is your education, so you have to go to school.’” Her parents weren’t always able to help their children with their classes, “but they taught us the value of education and the value of hard work and ethics, and that has been my inspiration.”

The key to beating the odds? Working hard, dreaming big, and finding the support you need at South Texas College from teachers who have been there, too.

“Our South Texas College family is committed to providing every team member and student with the tools necessary for professional and academic excellence,” said Ms. Rose Benavidez, Vice Chair of the Board of Trustees. “Our work and individuals like Dr. Alaniz transcend the classroom and have become a vital cornerstone for the incredible transformation of our region and every student that walks through our doors.”

Dr. Alaniz says if she were to ask her class why they are in school, “90 to 95 percent of my students would tell me ‘because I want a better life, not only for myself but for my parents.’”

That hits home for Alaniz. And that’s why she refuses to rest on her laurels.

“When I graduated with my doctorate, my son hugged me and said 'so what class are you taking next?’” At the time, she laughed and said she couldn’t possibly do more school, but now, with many of her students struggling in history, she’s thinking about getting a certificate in yet another subject.

Looking back, Alaniz remembers an affirmational exercise she performed as a student to put her goals into perspective. She wrote that she would get her master’s degree in five years, and her doctorate in 10. “I tell my students I left [STC], and I felt like such a fraud because I did not believe I could ever get a doctoral degree.”

But she *did*. And now, Dr. Alaniz gives her students that same exercise.

“Write down whatever your greatest dream is,” she asks. “Write it down even if you think, ‘I’m a fraud’ or ‘I will never do it.’

“Just write it down, because that held true for me.”

[*BREAKOUT BOX]:*

*Exceptional teaching careers start @ South Texas College!*

Elementary School Teacher: $56,380 average salary in Texas
Adult Basic Education and Literacy Instructor: $51,800
Teacher, Postsecondary: $69,130
Vocational Educator: $50,410
Early Childhood Education Administrator: $44,230

Education Teachers, Postsecondary: $62,710

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