**South Texas College**

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**A Dream Career 10 Years in the Making: Working Mom Manages Bachelor’s at 42**

The average college student isn’t exactly 18 anymore. In fact, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, a full *40 percent* are 25 and up, with many juggling full-time jobs and children.

This demographic data point would come as no surprise to South Texas College’s Mayte Gonzales, celebrating her 42nd birthday this October. The first-generation college student considers herself living proof that the best time to follow a lifelong dream is *right now.*

“You’re never too old to go back into something that you wanted to do,” says Gonzales. For returning students, she says the maturity that comes with age is an advantage: “It makes us embrace our classes, and we take it more seriously.”

While many adults take a “second chance” to attend college in their later years, Gonzales entered South Texas College as a “true freshman.” As a high school graduate in 1997, the idea of going to college just didn’t seem feasible, either practically or financially. At the time, she was a non-resident, meaning tuition would have cost double.

But when her son was born nine years ago, she knew it was finally time to start.

Beginning with just one or two classes per semester at South Texas College, Gonzales made slow but steady progress. “In 2016 is when I really pushed and said, ‘You know what? Let me go ahead and finish my associate,’” beams the management-minded mother. And in December, while working full-time at Macy’s as the sales manager for handbags, she won her coveted degree in business at last.

But Gonzales didn’t rest on her laurels. She set her sights on climbing the ladder even higher, hoping to become the top store manager one day. In service of her dream, she enrolled again with her alma mater, this time in the Bachelor of Applied Technology (BAT) program in Technology Management.

After such a long wait, one could forgive her for wanting to be overprepared.

“I wanted to make sure that I have a bachelor’s degree because I would hate for them to say, ‘Oh, I’m sorry, Mayte, we cannot give you this position because one of the requirements is that you do have a bachelor’s.’”

Gonzales continued working for Macy’s while steadily plugging away in the academic department. With increased experience and education, she earned a promotion to Senior Merchandise Manager at the Austin location, putting her in charge of everything from opening the store to creating the marketing calendar.

She was on a luge course to her highest career aspirations when the pandemic struck. Suddenly, the company that had employed Gonzales for six years reported that it would have to let her go.

Undeterred, and bolstered by her STC-powered academic resume, Gonzales set off on her job search. She quickly realized that she had more work to do.

“Every application was requiring or preferring a bachelor’s degree,” says the STC student, who knew then and there that it was time to turn up the heat on her higher education. “If you have a bachelor’s, you are more of the first choice.”

Gonzales returned home to the Rio Grande Valley, more determined than ever to finish her degree. While searching for a job, she began to accumulate college credit at top speed, thanks to South Texas College’s competency-based system. She applied her life skills and experience to move through the curriculum at a breakneck pace, taking as many courses as she could manage. The cost? Just $850 per accelerated, seven-week term.

“It’s really on your own pace,” says Gonzales, who appreciated the fast track to college credit as a non-traditional adult learner. She expects the Technology Management bachelor’s degree to make her even more marketable to employers.

“It will actually open up more doors,” explains the retail veteran.

At South Texas College, Gonzales is shoring up a broad skill set in business management, finance, information technology and human resource development — critical elements for a career in retail management. Best of all, the busy mom can do it all on her own time.

“Taking online courses has been fun, and I was already used to virtual meetings and collaborations with other teammates,” says the tech-savvy Gonzales. “I’m able to do it whatever time at night, whether it’s two or three in the morning.”

When reflecting on her journey, Gonzales is quick to credit her STC professors — in particular, retired instructor Debra Wyatt. “Mrs. Wyatt truly cares for her students,” she recalls. And even though the class was online, Gonzales says she never felt like she was just an avatar. “She wanted to have that connection with us … and she made it easier for us and more comfortable.”

For Wyatt’s part, it was an honor to share the spark of such a determined student in her final term at STC.

“She was extremely focused and dedicated,” says Wyatt, who felt an immediate kinship with Gonzales. “I was also an older student when I returned to college and got my degree, so I could really feel what she was aiming toward.”

It was perhaps Wyatt who was most deeply moved last month, when her student shared the good news: Gonzales, the never-give-up mom who had so many times taken her up on her “open-door” phone and email policy, had landed a job as an assistant manager at Banana Republic.

“I am so excited for her,” says the proud professor. “She is the kind of person that no matter what’s going on out there, she’s going to have positive energy toward it.”

For Gonzales, knowing her instructors have her back has afforded her the confidence to keep on trying and allowed her to soar. With graduation just a few terms away and a new job under her belt, her professional goals feel closer than ever.

“I can actually pursue becoming a general manager for either Banana Republic, Gap or Old Navy,” beams the first-rate retailer. “I don’t need to leave the Valley and move to pursue my dream.”

All the while, Gonzales is gearing up to become just the second in her family to graduate from college. She says it is a “big deal,” not just for her but also for her nine-year-old son and homework buddy.

“I want him to see that no matter how old you are, you can always pursue and achieve any dreams that you have,” she affirms.

The supervising super-mom expects her son to attend college someday. But, she says, to ensure that he follows in her footsteps, she first has to walk the walk: “You can’t tell someone to do something when you haven’t even done it yourself.”

It’s been a long journey for Gonzales, who took her first college class almost 10 years ago. Looking back, she realizes that when it comes to building a career foundation, there is nowhere she would rather be than STC.

“It’s been an honor and a privilege to attend this college,” says Gonzales, who would recommend STC to anyone ready to learn in a supportive, friendly environment. “It’s smaller, and it helps become more of a community versus just a college.”

For Wyatt, celebrating her retirement after 20 years at South Texas College, meeting Gonzales in her final semester of teaching was one more affirmation of her influential and rewarding career.

“She is such an amazing person,” effuses the professor. “A person like her, who is a mother and working very hard to set an example for her son and his future — it is just a marvelous thing.”

*Sources*

*“In reality, 40 percent of college students are 25 or older — well out of high school — and many have kids, full-time jobs or both.”*

*In 'Never Too Late,' Finally, A Guide For Adults Going To College*

[*https://www.npr.org/2018/12/23/678799694/in-never-too-late-finally-a-guide-for-adults-going-to-college*](https://www.npr.org/2018/12/23/678799694/in-never-too-late-finally-a-guide-for-adults-going-to-college)

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