**South Texas College**

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Lisa reviewed.

**Stronger with STC: A Bachelor’s Degree 20 Years in the Making**

“I am a 45-year-old college student,” declares Lisa Castillo-Salinas proudly. The South Texas College learner is living proof that it’s never too late to earn a degree.

A successful marketing and communications manager and a mother of two, the STC returnee is finally set to earn her Bachelor of Applied Science in Organizational Management … after putting the pause on college for over *two decades.*

“I’m one of those that always thought that I didn’t need school because I had done it for a very long time on my own,” says Castillo-Salinas. “The sad reality is I *really* needed school. It made me that much stronger.”

As a teenager, she had started at the University of Texas-Pan American (now University of Texas Rio Grande Valley) but felt lost in the crowd. “School and I didn’t get along very well,” admits Castillo-Salinas, who transferred to South Texas College in 1993 and liked the smaller environment a lot better.

Soon, however, life would get in the way. In an all-too-familiar twist, Castillo-Salinas got busy with work and wound up taking a hiatus that went on longer than expected.

“It wasn’t up until 2018 that I finally said, ‘I think it’s time that I go back and finish what I started,’” says the persistent alum, who was surprised to see so many changes since her first rodeo at STC, 20-plus years ago. For one, there’s the internet, which makes coming back to school so much simpler for a working mother. From course lectures on her cell phone to group chats and Zoom calls, she feels the support and convenience of her program, 24/7.

“I’ve had such a seamless experience — there haven’t been any hiccups,” she says about her classes, which run like a “well-oiled machine.” The virtual format allows her to be a better and more organized learner, tackling coursework on her own time:

“If I’m on lunch at work, I can just study. It’s easier to be a student.”

With only four classes left and set to graduate in the spring, Castillo-Salinas says the material she’s learning in her program is upping her game all around. Now, she’s not only applying her enriched business leadership skills at work, but she’s also drawing on her education to uplift her community as a civic leader.

“It’s been a great help for my personal and professional life,” shares Castillo-Salinas, who is practicing what she preaches as foundation president for her children’s school district, Sharyland ISD. “If I believe in education, then I need to be educated myself.”

It’s a lesson she carries home to her two teenagers, a junior and sophomore in high school. Both are enrolled in South Texas College’s Dual Credit Program, earning college credit and setting their sights on bachelor’s degrees while still in high school. Her daughter is hopeful about the University of Texas Health San Antonio School of Dentistry, while her son is considering Texas Tech University for agriculture.

“I love to tell people that we have three college kids at home,” beams Castillo-Salinas. When it comes to STC’s Dual Credit Program for her children, she says, “The seed has been planted for college, and it’s something that they know they have to do.”

If there’s one thing that sets South Texas College apart, Castillo-Salinas says, it’s the outstanding faculty. In particular, she mentions the late Dr. Tina Atkins as having a tremendous influence. This summer, when Castillo-Salinas experienced two deaths in the family, Atkins reached out to offer critical support and encouragement.

“She was probably the sweetest of all my professors, and she’s going to leave a lasting impression on me,” remembers Castillo-Salinas. “She was a phenomenal lady, and she did things for the Rio Grande Valley that were unheard of.”

For instance, Dr. Atkins was instrumental in developing the *Region One Education Service Center GEAR UP: Ready, Set, College* program, over 20 years ago. The effort would go on to support more than 25,000 students in becoming college-ready. What Castillo-Salinas remembers most about her favorite professor was the personal attention she gave to every student, transforming online classes into close communities. Dr. Atkins passed away from a heart attack on August 22.

“I was so lucky to have her as a professor,” Castillo-Salinas reflects.

Castillo-Salinas is also grateful to STC’s incredible support staff, like Student Success Specialist Alejandra Garcia, who helps keep her college plan on track. When the never-too-late learner needed to switch a class, she texted Garcia, and within a few hours, everything was taken care of. From regular email reminders to one-on-one help, she considers herself fortunate to have a one-woman support team who always “goes that extra mile.”

“She’s phenomenal,” effuses Castillo-Salinas. “I would suggest anybody who’s looking to go back to school and getting a bachelor’s at STC to reach out to [Garcia] because she has a wealth of information.”

For Garcia, it’s an honor to assist.

“Students can count on me to help them with any issues they might have,” says the specialist, noting that Castillo-Salinas’ determination makes her a textbook example of a successful returning adult student. “I would like to remind Lisa and all of our Bachelor’s Program students that they can do this, that education is one thing that is forever, and nobody can take it away from them.”

For the successful super-mom, STC’s superior support has made it easy to become a student again and finish her degree. Her only regret?

“I wish I would have done it earlier.”

And the 45-year-old college student isn’t planning to stop at her bachelor’s degree, either. She says she’s already learned so much at South Texas College that she feels confident taking it to the next level with a master’s degree in marketing.

She has come a long, long way, and looking back, it’s hard for her to imagine that she ever considered herself a “horrible student.”

“I never thought that I was going to go back to school. I just thought that ship had sailed,” says the future master marketer.

“Never in a thousand years did I think I’d be here … [but] I did it.”

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