

The First to Graduate But Not The Last

South Texas Stories

Introduction and Opening Scenes

<<sound of mariachi music¹>>

[Emily Aguilar]: College. Many people have mixed emotions about college. College for some people was the best time of their life, but also the most stressful. My name is Emily Aguilar and on this episode of South Texas Stories I will help guide first generation students with knowledge from a good friend of mine. I met Roel Santana while working at Academy, we became friends quickly with having common interests in the outdoors and our schoolwork. I was able to go to Roel for advice because I was also navigating the journey of college.

Many future students worry about paying for college, the majors to choose from, and exactly how difficult it may be. Many first-generation students are experiencing this for this first time in their family's history and have no idea how to navigate through this journey. I was fortunate enough to meet someone who experienced this and understood the factors in attending college. Roel Santana is a first-generation college graduate who attended Texas A&M University Corpus Christi and earned his bachelor's in mechanical engineering.

Being the first to graduate can have a lot of influence on your family who is on the fence about college. Having someone to look up to can cause new family members to attend college.

[Roel Santana]: All my immediate family, second/third cousins really. No one really went to school

[Aguilar]: This made it difficult for Roel to reach out to family who never experienced what he was going through. This however would break the cycle; people could now come to him and ask for advice.

[Santana]: It feels extremely overwhelming at first and exciting.

[Aguilar]: Roel understands the pressure of creating a new norm for his family. According to Center for First-Generation Student Success, 56% of students have parents without a bachelor's degree and 59% of those are the first sibling to go to college.² Encouraging family to go to college allows growth, always remember Si Se Puede!

¹ felix.blume, "Mexican Mariachis playing 'las manasnitás' on the square Garibaldi in Mexico City," February 17, 2014, <https://freesound.org/people/felix.blume/sounds/219317/#>. This sound is licensed under Creative Commons 0 public domain license.

² "National Data Fact Sheets," About the Center for First-generation Students, 2019, <https://firstgen.naspa.org/journal-and-research/national-data-fact-sheets-on-first-generation-college-students/7A515490-E6AA-11E9-BAEC0242AC100002>.

<<sound transitioning, football crowd cheering³>>

[Aguilar]: Getting into college is one thing but paying for it is an entirely new ballgame.

[Santana]: I had actually gotten a scholarship to play football in Kansas.

[Aguilar]: Roel understood this was an amazing opportunity to do what he loved and get the education he needed, without having to break the bank. But, after extensive injuries Roel came to the agreement with himself that his education mattered more than football.

[Santana]: I was on a scholarship but the injuries I had sustained, was just too much. Pretty much just looking out for my well-being and my future, so I kinda gave that up.

[Aguilar]: Giving up football and the scholarship meant that the issue of paying for college would reappear.

Many potential students have the fear of college debt and the fear of failure. Not having someone in the family to talk to can be very discouraging. Although public high schools have some counseling towards the end, it is the very basic and generic guidance. Every university is different, meaning the courses that they provide. Before entering college, many students feel pressured on deciding on a major they might not actually like. Failing in such a large aspect, such as having difficulties in college causes students to become insecure and doubt their potential.

Deciding on a major is just as important as getting into college. But that shouldn't discourage you on testing your knowledge and trying something new. Many people change their majors throughout college, it's very common and usually expected. Roel had to not only transfer to a new school but decide on a major they would provide.

[Santana]: So, initially when I transferred, I was a bio major and a focus I guess in humans, I wanted to become a nurse.

[Aguilar]: Roel understood that this was a degree he couldn't see himself doing.

[Santana]: I just couldn't see myself doing it for the rest of my life.

[Aguilar]: Communication is key. If you're unsure about the path you are on, don't be afraid to reach out. The university can help guide your decisions and provide information that you will

³ cpark12, "Sound Effect Football Game.wav," August 29, 2022, <https://freesound.org/people/cpark12/sounds/648448/>. This sound is licensed under a Creative Common 0 public domain license.

need. Roel found out about Mechanical Engineering, he was very interested, and he was able to quickly get on track to graduate.

[Santana]: The professors here at TAMUCC they're extremely knowledgeable.

[Aguilar]: Utilizing them while they're here is extremely important. Often times these professors have been in your shoes and can help shed some light on such a stressful time in your life.

Now that Roel had decided on a university and a major, the issue of paying for college is back at the surface. Roel had worked through high school, so juggling schoolwork and a job was not new to him. College is a bit different; the workload is much larger and the time it consumed was much greater. Working full time and going to school full time, can discourage many people and often leads to some people withdrawing.

[Santana]: Working full time is definitely not easy, I don't recommend it for anyone but if you're hungry enough to want to make money and want to get an education, it's definitely doable.

[Aguilar]: Roel understood hard work and knew that he wasn't going to ask for handouts.

[Santana]: Most of my shifts were 5AM to 2PM, and then I would go straight to class. I did it for four years – it's definitely doable working 40 hours a week and going to school full time.

[Aguilar]: For many people working while going to school isn't an option, and that's okay. Without financial support from family or others, student loans are often the answer to paying for school. Student loans are common, and most people graduate with some kind of debt. Texas A&M University Corpus Christi has an average in state tuition of \$21,774, if you're out of state it is about \$32,364.⁴ Roel needed a way to pay for college the first year, before he could find a job.

[Santana]: So, at first we did pull out loans because we really didn't know what we were doing, I'm the first child so we pulled out two loans for the first year.

[Aguilar]: There is nothing wrong with loans or having to seek financial support, the only thing that truly matters is getting the education you want and need.

If you do decide to work while going to college, look into jobs that have some sort of educational support. Most jobs understand that school is your priority and Roel's job at Academy was able to help delegate.

[Santana]: They were really good at working with my hours and school.

⁴ Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, "Tuition & Fees," Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, accessed November 29, 2022, <https://www.tamucc.edu/cost-and-aid/tuition-and-fees.php>.

[Aguilar]: On top of being able to fluctuate hours, they also had tuition reimbursement.

[Santana]: Academy was 1,500 a semester for a full time or part time. And then, so not only was I essentially getting paid to go to school, I was also getting a paycheck on top of that.

[Aguilar]: Another great benefit from working through college is the experience of multitasking. Proving to future employers that you can manage work and school life, entails you are capable of hard work. Many people who have had the opportunity to work or even be a part of management has an advantage on those who don't.

[Santana]: It will look great on your resume; with my management position it greatly helped me with my current career. I feel in a sense that I'm a little farther than others in my position as of right now who have the same degree as me, just because I have the experience of working vs some of those students who didn't work.

[Aguilar]: Setting yourself apart from others on resumes is key to getting picked for a job. Although working while going to school isn't a requirement or a necessity, there are some benefits some may consider.

Towards the end of your educational career and with graduation slowly approaching, applying for jobs can be terrifying. Many people find it difficult to step into the working field. Many universities will offer guidance in creating a resume, this is a huge advantage and should be used greatly.

[Santana]: I looked at their resume and changed stuff to what they put and what the university advised them to put, and it drastically helped me a lot.

[Aguilar]: The university wants to help you achieve your goals, take the time to meet with the advisors.

Joining your career can be intimidating. It is important to not get discouraged if you don't get hired right away, you are competing with many people for the same position. Roel knew that the more jobs he applied to the better chances he would receive.

[Santana]: I probably did, I applied for 40, no I'm lying probably 100 positions and interviewed for about 10.

[Aguilar]: This can be very stressful, finding a job can be very difficult, especially if you are looking to stay local or not leave home. It is also very common for people to not use their degree for a while, or even at all.

Being the change in your family can be extremely difficult, but the influence you have will create a new legacy. Being the first to walk the stage and graduate with a degree, shows others

that it is possible. You are not alone on this journey and there are thousands in the same position as you. Always remember, Si se Puede!

<<ending music, mariachi music⁵>>

⁵ felix.blume, "Mexican Mariachis playing 'las manasnitás' on the square Garibaldi in Mexico City," February 17, 2014, <https://freesound.org/people/felix.blume/sounds/219317/#>. This sound is licensed under Creative Commons 0 public domain license.

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