

## Take a lesson from TOCC grad, focus on the positive not the negative

By Martha S. Lee

**Sells, AZ-** When Delia Francisco talks about her journey towards earning her Associate of Arts in Social Work at TOCC in 2020, she focuses on the positive rather than the many hurdles she has overcome. However, it takes hearing her story to realize how much she values education and pursuing her career goals.

Four years ago, Francisco found herself a single mother of four children working customer service jobs to make ends meet. She had left high school when her first child was born. Her career options seemed limited without a high school diploma or GED. She realized that she wanted to set an example for her children of being committed to education. They were growing up and might graduate from high school before her if she didn't start soon!

Once she made her decision, Delia enrolled in the Pre-College/GED Program at Tohono O'odham Community College. She studied hard and earned her GED within a year of starting the program at TOCC's Wişag Koş Maşcamakuđ (Hawk's Nest Campus), in spring 2018.

GED Instructor Delores Saraficio saw Delia's potential and urged her to continue her education. Delia realized that with education she could work on her lifelong goal of contributing to the quality of life for Tohono O'odham families, making the Nation a healthier, safer place to live and raise children. Saraficio told Delia about TOCC's Gewkdag (Strength) Scholarship, which offers full tuition and fees plus a book allowance to recent high school graduates and GED recipients from the Tohono O'odham Nation. De-

lia thought about it and realized that yes, she could become a college graduate.

In fall 2018, Francisco began her journey as a full-time student at TOCC majoring in social work. She set up a routine to focus on her schoolwork while also fulfilling her family and work responsibilities. She would spend Monday through Thursday early afternoon on campus, taking classes, doing homework, and studying. Evenings were spent with her family, supporting her children in their sports and school events. On Thursdays, she would drive to Tucson and work as a caregiver from Friday to Sunday afternoon. Then on Monday, a new week would begin.

Delia worked hard and was able to renew her Gewkdag Scholarship for the second semester of her first year. She took three courses during summer session 2019 and then plunged into the 2019-2020 school year. Although her schedule was challenging, the fall went smoothly, and then she was in her last semester at TOCC.

One sign that it would be a difficult spring came in February: an individualized degree check revealed that she needed one more class to graduate that spring. Fortunately, after consulting with her social work advisor, she found an elective course that could enhance her social work path. Delia registered for EDU 201 Diversity in Education, an intensive course offered during spring break. The class met Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. during March 16-20, 2020.

Looking at those dates, readers may remember the uncertainty of that time as the coronavirus pandemic swept across the United States, followed by

business, government, and schools closing. On the Tohono O'odham Nation, non-essential programs closed on March 18, and the college announced a partial closure for staff and the extension of spring break through March 29. Needless to say, it was difficult for Delia to concentrate, but she did complete the education course because she loved understanding more about how children learn in classrooms that are diverse in the parameters of culture, age, class, gender, race, disabilities, learning styles, and other factors.

TOCC reopened online on March 30, 2020. Now came the most difficult time. Delia had three of her children doing online school at home, while her oldest daughter remained at boarding school in California but then was suddenly evacuated due to closures in that state. Delia discovered that she was very much an in-person learner. Listening to lectures, participating in discussions, submitting homework—everything was difficult online. All of this was exacerbated by spotty Wi-Fi and unpredictable internet crashes. A particularly arduous assignment in her anatomy and physiology course disappeared into cyberspace, and she had to re-do it...twice!

Delia and her classmates in the SWU 291 Social Service Delivery Systems course participated in a forty-hour service-learning experience. Delia worked with classmates to interview TOCC employees and people in the community about the potential value of a behavioral health service for college students. In her SWU 295 Foundations of Social Work Practice course she completed a comprehensive assessment with a mock client in the com-



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munity and further increased her skills in service documentation and career preparation in resumé development.

Meanwhile, as a caregiver, Delia was an essential worker and needed to keep caring for her clients. Somehow, she made it through April and May, for which she thanks her friends and family and the supportive community at Tohono O'odham Community College. "Here at TOCC, we're family," Delia says. She was so happy to graduate on June 5, 2020.

Delia intends to pursue a Bachelor of Social Work degree in the near future. She has taken this school year off to work and save money for school. She recently started a professional human service position in her field of study. She now serves as a Prevention Coach for the new Circles of Care Program with Sewa Uusim, the Pascua Yaqui Tribe's Behavioral Health Department. This is one more step in Delia Francisco's journey of inspiring her children to pursue higher education while also making a difference in the world.