

Persistence of O'odham woman proves that it is never too late to get started with your education

By Martha Lee

Sells, AZ- On a recent May morning, Olga Armenta-Vega sat outside in her shady yard in Sells District. Roosters crowed in the background, and her horses grazed nearby. A gentle breeze carried fresh scents from her garden. Although she is a busy student, mother, gardener, and wife, Armenta-Vega relaxed to talk about her journey. She seemed surprised and grateful for her role as an ambassador for reading, healthy living, and love of animals.

Olga was born and spent her early years in Phoenix. She was the only Native American in her primary school, but she did well and liked school. Moving to the small town of Sells and starting middle school in Topawa at age 10 were tough for her. She was teased at school for her Mexican heritage on her father's side. That feeling of not belonging led to some difficult times in high school.

Long story short, by her late teens, Olga had left high school and was raising her young children as a single mom. She took a job in the bakery/deli at Bashas' and worked her way up to bakery manager. To this day, she loves to bake and decorate cakes.

Still, something was missing. People search for themselves in different ways: Olga's detour led away from home and eventually to San Xavier



Olga Armenta-Vega. Sadie Carmen photo.

District, where she met Judy Daniel, a GED Instructor for Tohono O'odham Community College, in 2012. Olga started studying and developed a love of reading. She appreciated Daniel's patience and sense of humor and took some of the GED tests.

Back home in Sells in late 2012, Armenta-Vega rejoined the culinary field, returning to Bashas' and then working in school cafeterias for Baboquivari Unified School District through spring 2019.

In fall 2019, Olga decided to again pursue her education. She enrolled in a GED program that emphasized on-

line learning but found that she was not making progress. One day she responded to a posting on TOCC's Facebook page about the Pre-College/GED program there. By late fall 2019, Olga was attending class with TOCC's GED Instructor Delores Saraficio, whom she found to be someone "with so much patience and willing to meet you wherever you are."

Or as Olga put it in a lighter moment, "For a while I felt like I was bumping my head against the ceiling and couldn't go anywhere, but when I met Delores, she helped me get through so I could go places!"

During late 2019 through early 2020, Armenta-Vega attended in-person classes at TOCC's Wişag Koş Campus. It was disappointing to find out that the tests she had taken in 2012 did not count (since the GED was computerized and revamped in 2014). However, she took and passed the Arizona Civics Test, followed by the GED Language Arts, Social Studies, and Science tests. Then the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

During the late spring and summer of 2020, Olga studied math on her own and took practice tests but kept getting the same non-passing score. However, she was determined, so she persisted.

In August 2020, Saraficio reached out and invited Armenta-Vega to join the GED class that was meeting in real

time online. The five students and the instructor met every day in their Zoom room. Most of them, like Olga, were working on math. Previously she had been intimidated by math, but now she approached this subject with an air of discovery.

Olga learned geometry concepts such as the Pythagorean theorem by drawing shapes and watching Saraficio diagram and solve problems on a white board. The winter of 2020-2021 was the hardest, with hurdles like family illness and the heat in her home going out. Yet Olga was determined to graduate this year. She practiced and practiced and then took the mathematics GED test in April 2021. She passed!

Olga Armenta-Vega was so happy to graduate with her High School Equivalency diploma in TOCC's online Commencement ceremony on May 14, 2021. (The Commencement ceremony is on TOCC's YouTube channel, which can be reached by searching for "Tohono O'odham Community College" on YouTube, or by following a link to YouTube at the bottom of the www.tocc.edu homepage.)

Earning her GED was only a small part of Olga's journey over the past several years. She remarried and had children. Then, after the tragic death of her youngest daughter in 2013, she and her family were invited to a horse retreat. The experience of the horses' solid presence, along with the sweat lodge and traditional songs, gave her a measure of peace and a newfound connection to animals.

Olga and her husband Enrique Armenta added horses to their family, and Olga started a garden, planting corn, squash, and other produce. As much as possible, she cooks with these fresh vegetables to model healthy eating. Every year, the family helps with the Hector Rios Horse Camp. Olga's teenaged son and daughter participated in local rodeos.

How else does she spend her time? In addition to taking care of her animals (including a pig named Albert) and reading books (vampire novels are her favorite), Armenta-Vega helps with community efforts such as TOCC's recent distribution of book bags at the Tohono O'odham Nation's vaccination pop-up clinic on April 19. Thanks to her father, she speaks Spanish fluently and translates for the Nation's walkers for the Mali:na Project during the yearly pilgrimage to Magdalena, Mexico.

Speaking of long walks, Olga Armenta-Vega is preparing for her next journey. She has enrolled at TOCC as a college student and will start taking classes this summer session.