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Neto's Tucson: Ana Chavarin is a single mom, an immigrant and a success

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Ana Chavarin was honored as Outstanding Adult Learner of the Year by the Coalition on Adult Basic Education. Pima Community College

When Ana Chavarin left her native Sonora with her two children and her husband to come to Tucson, she had no idea what lay ahead. What she did know was that she wanted a solid education for her two kids and a better life for the family.

Fifteen years later, Chavarin, now a single mom of four, is on that road of a better life of education and opportunities. But it didn't come easy for the one-time undocumented immigrant.

It has been a struggle, a constant worry about providing for her children, filled with doubt and deep anxiety. And along the way it has been a nightmare: She was sexually assaulted, a violent criminal act that sent her into an emotional abyss.

But with the support of a therapist, a center for sexually abused women, the Pima Adult Education program at Pima Community College and her current employer, **Pima County Interfaith Council**, Chavarin is a symbol of strength, perseverance and dedication.

“I am a product of that love,” she said of her support circle that has sustained her and helped her chart the difficult waters she has encountered.

Recently Chavarin, a 34-year-old student at Pima College, was honored as Outstanding Adult Learner of the Year by the Coalition on Adult Basic Education. She was also recognized for her efforts promoting adult education by the Arizona Association for Lifelong Learning’s Ambassador Program.

Currently she works as a community organizer with the **Interfaith Council**, helping various churches and community groups collaborate on common issues of education, justice, fair wages and political representation. And she maintains her original night-time job from when she came to Tucson in 2003 — cleaning offices.

She’s a working mom, college student, organizer. She’s non-stop.

“All my life I was like this,” she said.

We talked Thursday at a west-side coffee shop, during a rare lull. Her story, in one way or another, reflects those of many people in Tucson who have migrated from another country. And each has brought with them the desire to succeed, regardless of legal status.

Chavarin’s story begins in Agua Prieta, across from Douglas. She was the oldest of four children; her single mother was illiterate.

“You can imagine how hard it was for her,” said Chavarin who had to leave middle school to earn money to help the family.

When she was 15 and working in a maquiladora, a border factory, she got pregnant. She married her son’s father. A second child came later. But their factory jobs paid too little to make a difference.

She said it was time to migrate to Tucson, where the children could have a chance. Here, Chavarin and her ex-husband continued to work at low-paying jobs, but she had hope. She and the kids were learning English.

But in 2009 her life came crashing down. While at work one night, she was sexually assaulted by someone she did not know. He got away; she thought she could overcome the trauma.

She couldn’t. She became depressed. She thought about committing suicide. She was suffering — alone.

“I wanted to leave this world,” she said. But she had to work and care for the children, who now numbered four.

One late night in despair, she called the Southern Arizona Center Against Sexual Assault.

“There I met a man with the nicest smile I had ever seen,” she said. He assured Chavarin that she was not alone and that she would survive.

She entered counseling and, subsequently, group therapy. By 2012 she began studying, first for her high school equivalency diploma through Adult Education.

Then came a favorable change in her legal status. Because she was a victim of a violent crime, she received a “U” visa, which led to her legal residency. Her two Mexican-born children also qualified, as indirect victims.

Chavarin began to thrive. She began to believe that she could accomplish her goals and, more important, help women like herself.

Aided with scholarships and private donations, Chavarin charged forward with her children beside her but without their father, who had walked out on them.

She has received other awards for her leadership in Adult Education and Pima College. She has traveled to Phoenix and Washington, D.C., to push legislators to fund adult education, which changes people's lives profoundly. Like hers.

"I want people to have access to education and opportunities," she said.

Chavarin is near completion of her associate degree at Pima and is looking to transfer to the University of Arizona with the eventual goal of earning a graduate degree in psychology, no matter how long it takes, she said.

Her eldest son is also a student at Pima and the three others are in school, all with their own dreams.

"We don't have luxuries, but we don't need them," she said.

What she does have, in abundance, is *ganas* — desire.