

## Getting Ganas, Motivation/Desire by Elsie J. Contreras

Three lessons I learned in college: the value of *ganas*, the truth of *orgullo*, and the power of integrity. *Ganas* because I would have never attended college without that first desire within me, which urged me through my senior year of high school - *to seek, to apply, to cross over boundaries*. The truth of *orgullo* because I never forgot where I come from and who I am - still that *Tejana* from Edna, Texas. The power of integrity because I said I would complete my Bachelor's degree in four years, and reminding myself of this statement as an extra push to keep moving forward.

*Ganas* was a word I heard growing up that became a melody in my mind. Mama told me to have *ganas* in everything I do. "Mija, quit talking about everything. Go out there and do something. Have *ganas*, no half-finished job." When my senior year in high school arrived with college applications, financial aid forms, and scholarship applications, I was a bit overwhelmed. I knew there was no way I'd be able to attend a large university because my parents did not have the money. Although by government standards, we were considered "upper middle-class," my parents had no college fund set up for me. With Daddy's diabetes and Mama's arthritis, a great deal of our money went to medical expenses. I knew the community college was nearby and one of the top ranked in the State of Texas for academics so I sent in the applications. They had an "open-door" policy, meaning that as long as I had my high school diploma and college entrance test complete, I would be accepted.

A group of LEAD (Letting Education Achieve Dreams) Ambassadors from the University of Houston-Victoria visited my high school and told us how there was "so much help from the government in Pell grants and Texas grants, especially if you're a minority." They talked about the myths of college like "college is only for smart people or rich people," and touched on topics like "scholarships and writing that winning essay." It had seemed like a dream come true - I knew after this visit, that there was help to go to college. I bothered my parents to complete their income taxes early, so I could get my FAFSA (Federal Application for Student Aid) complete. The numbers looked like they were all scrambled together; because I do not read numbers as well as I read words.

When the results arrived, a deep feeling of dread and discouragement filled my insides with gloom. The paper said that my dad made too much money and I might qualify for other forms of aid, but the "expected family contribution" was too high. Seeing that zero on the form struck anger within me.

At that time, I turned to scholarship applications. I nearly lost enthusiasm when I saw the secretary stamp "Non-Need" with the red ink on my application. "*We'll see what is available for the high class applicants.*" Her words hurt me; I was not high-class!

I thought about my essays I had written and how I had mentioned my desire to help people, become a Latina role model. I was not trying to get a college education so I could make a whole lot of money; I was all about making a difference.

Community leaders within my small town recognized me as the leader of the Pan-American Club and how I was helping my fellow students become involved in extra-curricular activities. The same people recognized me as a member of the Family, Career, and Community Leaders of America and how I volunteered in the community. The same people recognized me as the editor and photographer for the yearbook who chased the football players on the field - not to get their number - but to get a good shot. Little did I know these same community leaders were recognizing my name on the scholarship applications I had submitted to their organizations.

When Senior Honors Night arrived, the night I would find out if I received any scholarships, I was surprised at how many times I would walk across the stage and receive scholarships. I didn't see it coming. The largest was \$1000 from the community college, and *mi familia* cheered loudly when I walked across the stage, and my cheeks blushed with pride.

Receiving the scholarships did not send me on this trip that I could conquer the world but did show me that with *ganas* as the start, people will believe in me, because I believed in myself. (with that help from Mama reminding me about deadlines and being my taxi)

My first three years of college were paid for. *Gracias a Dios*. There were other trials along the way, like getting my driver's license. There was no way I could rely on Mama to take me to college every day, so I found myself working in a stressful environment - retail. I committed to retail in order to save money for a vehicle and faced my fear of driving and overcame it in eight months. There was flexibility in the hours of retail, but after spending four hours in class, and then eight hours on my feet, *who wants to study?* I had to force myself to study because I knew it was necessary, and I knew I would lose the scholarships if I did not pass. After three years of retail, I grew frustrated and knew I had some education, so maybe I could find a better job. After two years of college, I had signed up to become one of those "LEAD (Letting Education Achieve Dreams) Ambassadors, like the ones who had talked to me as a high school student. I started giving tours and the informative sessions during my visits to schools. The Ambassador position was part-time. I took Fridays off from retail which was not always easy, so I could work all day, promoting higher education. Retail became more tiring and frustrating, and I knew I needed a better job.

A job that would not drain my energy and allow time to study. I spent a summer working in an insurance office which helped me survive fifteen hours of college; I was the *loca* that signed up for FIVE summer courses so I could graduate in the next year. I spent part of the fall working there, until I got laid off. That was heart-breaking because I never adjusted to change well.

In October of 2005, God opened the door to me - to substitute teaching. Substitute teaching became my passion and showed me the great rewards of making a difference in the life of a child. I had learned in college that I wanted to be a professor, not a high school teacher like originally planned. The students asked me "Ms. C, what are you going to college for? You make it seem so fun." I answered, "Yes, it IS fun, but it's work. I am gonna be a professor." Their eyes lit up with interest, "Oh really? A professor? We're going to college, so YOU can be our teacher because you make learning fun." No greater words had been spoken that urged me forward to obtain my Master's.

My college experiences have taught me many things about life as well as myself. I became a member of the Latin American Student Organization where I met Gloria Espitia, who would become my mentor and encourage me to go public with my writing and my Latina voice. In 2003, the Latina Forum was established, and we started the journey of promoting higher education to young Latinas. I have given motivational speeches, served as a panelist, and volunteered to coordinate events.

After completing my Bachelor's degree in the summer of 2006, I did not feel a death of my past college experiences but a greater joy within me - a greater joy of a new beginning. I became the first member of my family to receive a Bachelor's degree and saw I had started a new tradition of education in my family. I do not regret starting college at a community college because *big dreams take baby steps*. I want to destroy the myth that college is for smart people or only honor students. Sometimes, people may think I am smarter than others, but I always reply, "No, I am not smarter than you or anyone else. Just determined." I believe that God gave me the *ganas* to begin my journey and held me when I needed the comfort of His reassurance. He showed me my calling when I needed to see it most. The best definition of integrity is, "saying I am going to do something and actually doing it and completing it."