By Natalie Brunell | February 12, 2019

MARGARITA LOPEZ ISN’T YOUR TYPICAL student at the University of Southern California.

“Most days I forget that I’m 58,” Lopez said. “I’m just trying to get to class in 10 minutes from clear across campus.”

Lopez, a resident of a Los Angeles suburb called Hawthorne, always dreamed of going to college. But then life got in the way. She married young and started a family, channeling all her energy into her children’s futures.

“I put it on the backburner because I chose to have a family and I wanted to devote my time to them,” Lopez said.

Lopez worked hard to get her kids into elite schools, and when more money was needed, she took shifts at her local Michael’s store and cleaned homes to help support her family.

It wasn’t always easy to be away from home because her youngest, Emilio, was born with cerebral palsy and as a quadriplegic, needs round-the-clock care.

“He’s just like the center of our family and he’s what makes us good. He’s what keeps us grounded and good,” Lopez said.

Lopez and her husband of 38 years, Medardo, have their routine down to a science when it comes to getting 24-year-old Emilio ready for the day.

He’s bathed, changed and fed (and insists on watching the local news each morning), before heading to special needs classes that allow him to do art and interact with other special needs adults.

“He’s just like any of my other children. He just takes a bit more time,” Lopez said.

After his wheelchair is hoisted into the school bus in the morning, it’s Lopez’s turn to get ready for her classes and head to USC.

Never far from her mind is the reason she even ended up back in school. And that reason is her daughter Milanca.

Lopez’s second youngest daughter adored school and finished as her high school valedictorian, even after having a child...
at just 16 years old. She went off to her dream school, the University of California at Berkeley, and often sent Facebook messages to her mom encouraging her to come up and attend college with her. Lopez brushed the suggestion off.

“Here she was encouraging me to go to school, something I’ve always wanted to do and I completely ignored it,” Lopez said, getting emotional.

Milanca was accepted to graduate school at UCLA to continue her education, but just six days after graduating from UC-Berkeley in 2012, she and her 6-year-old son were killed in a car accident involving a drunk driver.

“I thought I would never recover from that grief,” Lopez said. “It was a grief so profound.”

Heartbroken long after the funeral, she went searching for memories of Milanca on Facebook one day and came across those messages.

“It was definitely a sign. It was a sign that I needed to finish a dream that I had for so long,” Lopez said. “I read that and it made me tremendously sad that I didn’t act upon it while she was alive.”

With the encouragement of another daughter, Emma, Lopez finally took steps to get her GED and eventually enrolled in community college.

Getting into USC as a transfer student last fall was a dream come true. She received the Transfer Dean’s Scholarship plus the University Grant, making it possible for her to finally achieve her dream of a college degree. All she could think about was Milanca.

“It makes me feel like I hope she’s proud of me. I hope she’s proud and I know she’s looking down at us,” Lopez said.

Unsurprisingly, Lopez got nothing less than an A- in any of her first semester classes.

“I’m just happy that I’m still healthy and that this brain can retain information brand new,” Lopez said. “I’m just grateful to God that I’m able to do this.”

And those first-day-of-school jitters of walking onto a campus filled with tech-savvy twenty-somethings has now faded.

Lopez says the USC community has embraced her and she doesn’t mind being “the mom” in the class.

“It’s kind of like once you go to the beach, the water is cold. But once you get in, it gets warm. And I feel the same way about anything that you’re afraid to do. You have to just do it,” Lopez said.

She says her struggles in her life have made her stronger and hopes her story can serve as an inspiration for not only her children, but other Hispanic women.

“Education is important because that’s the only way that someone like me, a Latina, a woman can be heard,” Lopez said. “That’s the only way to break any type of barriers to get out of the cycle of poverty.”

And if we can take one lesson away from her, she says it’s that age means nothing.