

SHARING A MILESTONE MOMENT

Derby family celebrates earning college degrees together

BY KELLY BRECKUNITCH kelly@derbyinformer.com
Jul 18, 2023



Derby's Edith Castillo always knew she wanted to be a teacher, but somewhere along the lines life – and being a full-time mom of five children – got in the way.

Castillo would not be denied, though, recently completing a six-year process earlier this summer to earn her associate's degree in Early Childhood Education from Butler Community College.

Unsurprisingly, Castillo was not alone when celebrating her graduation on the BCC campus in El Dorado, with her family on hand to support her. Some family members also joined her on stage as her younger sister, Alondra Lopez-Gomez, and daughter, Annette Castillo-Lopez, earned their associate's degrees as well – amplifying the meaning of that milestone moment.



“To me, the coolest part was being in a front row seat when they got to walk on the stage,” Edith said.

“At the end of the day, I feel like earning the degree, we did it,” Alondra said. “We did all that and we finished it. It’s an overwhelming feeling.”

Both Alondra and Annette earned their degrees through Butler’s Early College Academy while graduating from Derby High School at the same time. Alondra followed a similar path as Edith, earning her degree in Elementary Education while Annette completed an associate’s degree in Health Science.

The Butler Early College Academy is a two-year program both Alondra and Annette started in their junior year. While most of the homework is done online, the program does require students to be on campus to earn their degrees. Handling a high school course load and extracurricular activities (soccer, yearbook, etc.) may have added to the degree of difficulty, but they didn’t view that as any different than challenges other students at BCC might have faced.

“I think anybody who takes those classes has challenges, like my mom. She might have taken two or three classes at a time but she has a full house of kids. She has her daily duties of being a mother,” Annette said. “It was difficult for her, too. It was just as difficult as it was for us doing our daily activities, helping around the house, doing our daily high school work.”

“When I started going to school, it was six years ago. I had all my kids in school and was like, ‘OK, it’s time for me,’” Edith said. “I know it took me six years, but they were my biggest motivation to just keep going. I was like, if they can do it and they’re doing soccer, they’re doing clubs, they’re doing high school, there’s no way that I can’t do it. I feel like that’s a special thing that we’ll always share.”

Completing the coursework to earn their degrees, the trio noted there was a lot of support offered between them to buckle down and make sure assignments were turned in on time. Beyond that, though, a kind word, home-cooked meal or showing up for those extracurricular activities is something Annette also said helped keep them going.

Edith started working as an assistant teacher at TOP Early Learning Center South (off K-15) roughly one year before earning her degree, getting some scholarship assistance from her employer as well – both as a student and a parent. Now, after earning her associate’s, she will be able to pursue a lead position with the education center.

All of Edith’s children (as well as Alondra) graduated from TOP, which is part of what drove her to return to the learning center in a professional capacity. Alondra also currently works at TOP South. She will enroll at Wichita State University this fall, while both plan to continue their education and pursuit of potential full-time teaching positions.

Taking a different path, Annette pursued a Health Science degree to earn her prerequisites and get into nursing school early – intending to graduate with a nursing degree from Newman University (where she will also play soccer) in two years.

Collectively, the trio of Edith, Annette and Alondra represent the first generation in their family to graduate from college. With that, they all feel a shared responsibility to continue breaking those barriers for the next generation and helping educate them – family, acquaintances or otherwise – to the opportunities out there.

“For the kids who can’t really afford college, this is a cheaper way to do it, and if their parents can’t support them it’s a faster way to get out there and support themselves,” Annette said of the Early College Academy.

After graduating from Butler together, Edith, Annette and Alondra now plan to keep pushing toward a new shared goal – earning their bachelor’s degrees in two years.