

LIFE PATHS

Changing course: How college redefined 2 lives

They found their way at IVC and Saddleback

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When Juan Salazar and Sharla Clemente enrolled in Saddleback College and Irvine Valley College, respectively, they embarked on a quest to discover and pursue their passions.

Both had a thirst for knowledge coupled with a desire to provide a better life for themselves and their families; the two colleges making up the South Orange County Community College District have provided the two students with an array of services to help guide them on their journey.

Now, armed with the tools they need to achieve their goals, Clemente and Salazar are living proof that higher education is available to anyone, regardless of background.

From foster care

Irvine Valley College student Sharla Clemente doesn't shy away from her past, as dark as it was.

Instead, Clemente channels those life experiences to use as a mechanism for serving and inspiring others.

Clemente, 26, recalls with detail her days as a foster youth who was removed from her family for her own safety at age 13.

A victim of physical abuse, Clemente was shuffled from foster family to foster family, from Los Angeles to the Inland Empire, and said some of those situations were also destructive.

She ran away multiple times and acknowledged being a "troublemaker," and by the time Clemente aged out of the foster system at age 18, a college education wasn't a consideration.

Then came a spark of clarity. Clemente realized she had a 4-year-old brother whom she had never met.

"I think at that point, I was ready to start the journey of (healing), working on building a better life for my baby brother," she said. "I didn't want him to know what foster care felt like. I didn't want him to not know what our family or my father as an abuser was like."

Clemente figured it was time to challenge herself and "prioritize" her relationship with her brother.

She relocated to Orange County and enrolled in Irvine Valley.

Clemente began taking advantage of programs at Saddleback available to former foster youth and students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

"I was a little bit nervous and kind of had the imposter syndrome," she said. "But I'm so grateful with the people that were here, the students that were here, the instructors, the counselors ... a lot of good people here in general."

At first, Clemente was considering a career in the medical field, but after taking science classes, realized that wasn't her passion.

Instead, she majored in psychology and will graduate with an associate degree after the Spring 2025 semester.

She took advantage of Irvine Valley's Extended Opportunity Programs and Services, a state-funded program for students who are educationally and financially disadvantaged.

The programs and services help students realize their full potential by guiding them in establishing and pursuing educational goals.

Clemente is also part of NextUp, a supplemental program designed to help students and Guardian Scholars, a program that provides a variety of services to former foster youth.

Last year, Clemente served as vice president of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Access within the Associated Students of Irvine Valley College.

Currently, Clemente serves as the student trustee on the South Orange County Community College District Board of Trustees, where her role is to represent the students as a member of the district Governing Board.



PHOTO COURTESY OF JUAN SALAZAR

Juan Salazar turned his life around for his children and is working on his second degree.



PHOTO COURTESY OF SOCCCD PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Sharla Clemente serves as the student trustee on the SOCCCD Board of Trustees after overcoming a difficult childhood.

As student trustee, Clemente attends all Board of Trustee meetings and has the same responsibilities as any publicly elected trustee.

"Sharla's journey as a student leader is not only exceptional but inspirational to many students at Irvine Valley College," said Rosa Prado, director of EOPS/CARE, NextUp, CalWORKS and Guardian Scholars programs at Saddleback. "Sharla's collaborative nature and genuine interest in the well-being of all students make her a strong advocate for the student community of the South Orange Community College District."

Clemente said involvement in student government and on the board of trustees has helped to develop her voice.

She had the opportunity to visit Washington, D.C., and speak in front of congressional boards on behalf of foster youth.

"I'm definitely grateful for the road that led to me here," Clemente said. "I ended up finding out that I had a passion ... for representing kids in foster care. I feel like that is my purpose. I feel like that's why I'm going to school."

Love for learning

Anyone who has ever considered

attending college but quickly dismissed the idea, thinking there are just too many obstacles to overcome, should meet Juan Salazar.

Having earned an associate in science degree from Saddleback College in 2019, Salazar is now back at Saddleback and on the verge of earning a second degree, this one in engineering.

Salazar, 35, is a member of Saddleback's nationally recognized robotics team, Rover, and was selected to attend the Society of Hispanic Engineers National Convention at the end of October.

He is a participant in INCLUDES, an initiative of the National Science Foundation designed to make STEM careers available to underrepresented demographic groups.

Salazar's accomplishments are notable, especially given his background.

Salazar did not graduate from high school and acknowledges being "young and dumb and living life fast."

Then at age 19, Salazar's life took a dramatic turn.

He fathered one daughter and then a second daughter.

"When I had my kids, that changed my whole perspective," he said. "And I just wanted to be a good father and set an example for my kids. One way or another, I was going to figure it out. I didn't want them to be raised by grandma or by some other individual."

In 2011, Salazar enrolled in Saddleback College in search of a career path, while his wife agreed to devote her time to raising their daughters.

"I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for her support," he said.

In the coming years, Salazar was forced to put his education on hold a few times to take care of family responsibilities.

At one point, Salazar was working three jobs, including a night job as a janitor, in order to provide for his family and pay for his education.

He finally earned an associate degree in advanced manufacturing from Saddleback in 2019.

After earning his degree, Salazar interned for a company, learning all aspects of manufacturing.

He currently works at Urban Workshop, directly applying what he learned during his first time at Saddleback.

Salazar then returned to Saddleback to advance his education and career.

"So, I decided to work a little bit backwards ... I heard it one time where sometimes you take one step forward and two steps back," he said.

Salazar, who has also served as a math tutor at Saddleback, figures to earn his second associate degree in engineering within three semesters.

From there, he plans to attend a four-year university and pursue a degree in mechanical engineering.

"I would have to say that I'm blessed and highly favored in the sense of landing at Saddleback because that school has a lot of different resources and individuals that have helped me out along the way and are continuing to help me out," he said.

Salazar said his mentor at Saddleback is Art Nitta, dean of Science, Technology, Engineering and Math, whom he credits for offering advice on the best strategies for pursuing his passion.

Nitta said Salazar displays "genuine enthusiasm" and a "love for learning."

"He is one of the most memorable and exceptional students I've had the pleasure of working with at Saddleback College," Nitta said. "His genuine love for STEM is a source of delight for the staff and faculty who support our STEM program, as he continues to remind us why we also got on our own journey in STEM, that led us to Saddleback College."

When it all seemed overwhelming, Salazar turned to his family to recenter himself.

"To just sit down with my kids and play Barbies with them, watch Disney cartoons," he said. "At that moment, I felt no matter what pressures or anything that I was going through, everything was OK, because this is what I live for."