

# Xiomara Peña Driven to Succeed

Getting by with a little help from friends

BY DEBORAH SHADOVITZ

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iomara Peña is a 19-year-old Sophomore at Pierce College taking well above the average course load (18 units/6 classes), earning a 3.75 GPA. She's been a Dean's Honors recipient. Rather than taking a break during intersession, she's taking two classes. (One, if any, is the norm.) During last year's intersession she took two classes — and also did an internship at City Councilman Cardenas' office after classes and on days off. Following that, along with spring and summer courses, she interned at Mayor Villaraigosa's Valley office. What's more, she landed those internships by making her own calls, not through connections. In fact, she comes from a family of very modest means. Meeting her for the first time, I was extremely impressed by this slight and seemingly shy young woman. And then I learned one more thing about Xiomara. She's accomplishing all this while raising a now two-year-old son.

Xiomara has always been a good student. Indeed, she took honor courses and was enrolled in her high school Humanitas Program. "Right before I got pregnant I was acting out, having a teenage moment, trying to be cool. However, I still maintained good grades. My parents valued that."

But having a baby in high school makes education and, therefore, advancement in life much harder. On a visit to her high school counselor while six months

pregnant, one staff member told the 16-year-old not to bother with college planning since she probably wouldn't even finish high school. Later, at Pierce, while seeking counseling regarding transferring to CSUN or USC, a counselor said she shouldn't count on it since she had a child.

Too often, teen motherhood causes or continues a vicious cycle. Less than 1/3 of teen mothers complete high school. Children in foster care are more likely to end up in prison or homeless. Children of teen mothers are more likely to become teen parents. Xiomara's older sister and one of Xiomara's good friends both fell into that high school dropout minimum wage cycle.

Luckily, upon reporting her pregnancy to her school nurse, Xiomara was given an information packet with info about El Nido Family Centers. Since 1925, El Nido has been providing parents and children with guidance and resources.

"I really was not too interested, but gave it a shot," Xiomara shares. "But once I started the program I didn't want to leave. My El Nido counselor Jennifer helped me set goals, determine steps and manage my time. That was major."

"Jennifer helped me find a prenatal clinic and helped with hospital forms. During labor I almost died from complications. Jennifer came to see me like she was family. Next,



she helped me get subsidized daycare (I have priority as a full-time student) and helped with information about my baby's shots."

Xiomara also earned two \$1,000 El Nido scholarships, which she used to cover books and purchase a laptop.

Xiomara says she can rely on her parents. "My father always attended school meetings and expressed appreciation for my good behavior, and acknowledged my imperfections. Other parents aren't as fortunate so it is hard for them and they have El Nido to support them emotionally."

"El Nido provides many benefits such as car seats or food, but I am able to provide these on my own. My father does dreadfully hard labor and my mother cleans houses

and/or watches my son."

Not everyone needs material help and El Nido is there for them too. It doesn't matter what type of home you're from. When you get into a questionable situation it's a huge help to simply have a counselor's support.

Xiomara is applying to CSUN and USC, focusing on CSUN because of its top accounting program. El Nido is still there for her to turn to. She was even honored by El Nido for the example she has set.

"The program made an impact on my life," Xiomara reflects. "If my sister had a program like El Nido when she got pregnant, maybe she could have had a better life too. If my friend had stayed with the program maybe she wouldn't be struggling. Programs all over are being cut now and education costs are rising. I feel terrible for the people who won't be helped by a program like El Nido."

"I'm going to school to prove it is not impossible for me, and it won't be impossible for others. I would also like my son to be proud of me for accomplishing a good career. I plan to teach him to pursue and value a good education and to follow his dreams, set goals, and have high expectations for himself." ♦

▶ **El Nido Family Centers** is a non-profit organization dedicated to supporting and strengthening at-risk families. With ten locations in the greater LA area, El Nido works with individuals within families and with families as a whole, providing prevention and intervention to "break the cycles" of child abuse and neglect, teen pregnancy and juvenile delinquency and to create positive, productive futures.

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