

## WCU Unsung Heroes – The Astudillo Family



*The Astudillo Family, from left, Alondra, Juan Jr., Gregoria, and Juan.*

In the fall of 2013, Alondra Astudillo became a WCU communications studies major, after two successful years at Delaware County Community College.

In December 2014, Alondra's father, Juan, joined WCU as a groundskeeper. By 2015, her mother, Gregoria, was a campus custodian, working

second shift. In August 2015 Alondra's youngest brother, Juan Jr., enrolled at WCU as a first-year student.

The fact that so many members of one family are now part of the WCU family is not, in itself, unique. At last count, some 145 WCU employees had dependents enrolled at the University.

But every family's struggles – and every family's joys – are uniquely their own. This is the story, then, of the struggles and joys of the Astudillo family. Lately, there has been much to celebrate – Gregoria and Juan passed their citizenship tests and became U.S. citizens in October. This past Sunday Alondra became the first member of her family to earn a bachelor's degree.

To see a daughter one day graduate from college was probably inconceivable to Juan and Gregoria when they first married. After all, struggles were all they knew in their home village of Xilocintla, Mexico. Though this hamlet is just 45 minutes from Acapulco, you won't find infinity pools, night clubs and other tourism trappings in Xilocintla. It's a hardscrabble community in the state of Guerrero where jobs are scarce and opportunities limited. In fact, Guerrero ranks number one in the emigration of workers to the U.S.

Although it meant leaving family, friends and culture behind, Juan joined that emigration north as a newly married young man. He briefly worked in California but friends encouraged him to move to Coatesville, Pa. When he had saved enough money, he helped Gregoria and their toddler son Osiel (now 28) move to Coatesville, too. The Astudillo family settled into Chester County, strived to learn English, and, most of all, they worked. Juan took any job he could find in construction and landscaping and soon started a side business specializing in hardscaping and masonry.

Gregoria was employed in the fast food industry most of the time, never rising above minimum wage even after 12 consecutive years with one employer. Eventually, the family grew to include Ariana (now 25), Alondra, 24, and Juan, 20.

“When I was a kid I remember that my parents – especially my dad – was always, always working,” says Alondra. “It’s pretty much that same way today.”

Yet the Astudillo children also knew they were front and center in their parents’ lives.

“My mom and dad do it all for us,” says Alondra. “They want us to have opportunities that they never had.”

Despite their busy schedules, the Astudillos get together every Sunday night for a family meeting. They continue that tradition today, even though the kids are now young adults.

The Astudillo Family Meeting is, in part, a business meeting. Juan eventually wants to grow his side business, or start another side business, and employ any of his kids who want to take part in the endeavor. So around that kitchen table, business development ideas are hashed out and short- and long-term plans hammered out.

But the weekly meeting is, in larger part, a reinforcement and reminder of what could be called the “Astudillo Family Code.” It’s a code that celebrates the individual strengths of each family member as well as their interdependence and connection. Some weeks, Juan shows a motivational video that imparts a life lesson he finds particularly important; other weeks, one of the kids might share a problem they’re having at work or school and ask for advice.

The Astudillos are smart about seeking advice outside the family, too – this is how Alondra became interested in attending college. In 8<sup>th</sup> grade, she became involved with Chester County Futures, a nonprofit that provides support to motivated local students of limited means. It was then that she started to think that a four-year college could be a possibility.

After graduating from Coatesville Area High School and completing two years at Delaware County Community College, Alondra finally realized that dream three years ago, when she became a Golden Ram. But she is the first to acknowledge that her early days at WCU weren’t easy. There was much to learn and many things to navigate – far beyond what she had ever encountered on a smaller community college campus. And there was no one at home who could show her the way.

“We were proud of Alondra being in college but we didn’t know anything about it,” says Juan. “This was new to us.”

Luckily, Alondra isn’t afraid to knock on doors and ask for help. And she knocked on the right door when she found Chris Brenner, now director of Student Conduct but at that time director of Off Campus & Commuter Services.

Brenner shrugs off the title “mentor” but that’s exactly the role she has played to Alondra over the years. “Alondra would pop in to see me and sometimes had a question or problem I could help with. I also encouraged her to connect with Career Development Center and learn about internships,” she says.

“I just tried to help her out. Like with my own kids, sometimes Alondra took my advice and sometimes she didn’t,” she adds with a chuckle. “But in all seriousness, Alondra is very hard

working. She is willing to put in the extra time that's needed and seeks out every opportunity to succeed."

It wasn't long before Alondra was flourishing on campus. She decided to minor in Latin American Studies. Then, after taking a few Chinese classes and doing well in them, she added a second minor in Chinese and became president of WCU's Chinese Club. She participated in a study abroad trip to China in the summer of 2015, loving every minute of it except, she says, "missing my family very much."

Meanwhile, life wasn't standing still for the rest of the Astudillo family. Juan and Gregoria were taking English-as-a-Second Language classes at WCU. They wanted to become proficient in English for their careers and also to prepare to become U.S. citizens.

The U.S. citizenship exam has two parts: a language section demonstrating applicants can speak, read and write in English, and a civics portion with 100 possible questions. Questions on past exams have included "Name one of the two longest rivers in the U.S." and "The Federalist Papers supported the passage of the U.S. Constitution. Name one of the writers."

It's been noted that many native-born citizens might not pass this exam – at least not without hitting the books first. Which is exactly what Juan and Gregoria did – the couple spent countless hours studying and finally, this past October, headed to Philadelphia to take the test. "I was nervous," says Gregoria.

Her anxiety turned to exhilaration when she discovered that they had both passed the exam. But nothing could compare to the joy and pride Gregoria felt this past Sunday when she watched her daughter walk across the stage at Commencement.

Alondra Astudillo may be the first in her family to graduate from college but chances are, she won't be the last. Juan Jr. currently has a 3.6 GPA at WCU. "He's the smart one in the family," says Alondra. "The rest of us can't keep up with him."