

The Power of Persistence

By Ashley Festa

As one of 13 children, Victoria Olivo often felt neglected growing up. Her mother, who had problems with alcohol, simply gave up. “She didn’t want to take care of us,” Olivo says. Her father and stepmother did what they could to make ends meet, but money was constantly a struggle. Olivo started working full time at age 17. She was never encouraged to continue her education. That was considered a waste of money.

But when Olivo found herself working 60- to 80-hour weeks in a downtown San Antonio clothing store, she realized that path wasn’t what she wanted for her life. She started steering in a different direction – toward higher education. Following that route meant she would be the first in her family to pursue a degree.

Her family didn’t offer much support. Her father reminded her that college was expensive, and she didn’t have the means to pay for it. Not one to be easily deterred, Olivo began classes at St. Philip’s College. Two years later, she started her studies at UTSA.

Now a senior on the verge of graduation, Olivo, 23, will earn degrees in both psychology and women’s studies. On especially hard days, she reminded herself that there were a lot of people who didn’t believe in her, people who didn’t expect her to accomplish anything in life. “I’m really going to surprise them,” she says. “I don’t think anything can stop me from getting a Ph.D.”

Olivo wasn’t always so self-assured. When she was admitted to UTSA, she wasn’t sure what to study because she didn’t know what kind of job she could get with a bachelor’s degree. So she entered the College of Business, thinking she couldn’t go wrong. “I was trying to be smart about it,” she says. “But I realized it was not for me.”

She changed gears and headed into the College of Liberal and Fine Arts, deciding psychology suited her better. Then she took an introductory course in women’s studies.

“I was pretty skeptical at first,” she says, and admits she frequently argued with her professor. But it didn’t take long before she was hooked. “It made me understand more where I was coming from. I’m a feminist, and I’m proud of it,” Olivo says. The course taught her the true meaning of feminism, a knowledge that sparked a deeper appreciation of her own life.

Her voice radiates with passion as she talks about what she’s learned. “I had been taught that whatever anyone teaches you, then that’s true. Not to question it,” she says. Now, she’s no longer afraid to challenge others’ ideas. “I’m a more well-rounded person by questioning those things rather than just accepting them.”



Plans for the Future

After uncovering a love of women’s studies, Olivo declared it as a double major with psychology. She discovered links between the two courses of study and eventually found ties to business as well. Dr. Kristina Durante, assistant professor of marketing, was searching for a research assistant. Olivo’s interests made her a natural fit for the type of experiments Durante had in mind.

“She has an unbridled curiosity and passion for understanding human behavior,” Durante says. “I use an evolutionary theoretical foundation to inform my research on the consumer behavior of women and families. Victoria’s background in women’s

studies allowed my research team to get a better understanding of other perspectives on our topic, which has been quite valuable to our writing and research design.”

Although Olivo loves working with Durante and enjoys the research, her heart is set on combining psychology and women’s studies. The portrayal of women in media such as video games intrigues her; she cites studies in which some participants were asked to play games depicting violence against women and afterwards were asked questions about the treatment of women. Those who played violent games responded more negatively than those who played non-violent games. Olivo plans to pursue similar

research avenues on her way to a doctoral degree. Though it can be difficult to move straight into a Ph.D. program from undergraduate work, Olivo is confident she’ll be accepted.

Olivo credits UTSA with awakening a sense of curiosity she didn’t know she had. Then, her professors guided her into studies that suited her. Psychology professor Ann Eisenberg directed her toward the McNair Scholars Program, meant for students preparing for doctoral studies. To be considered for a McNair scholarship, applicants must be first-generation college students with a financial need or be among those who are traditionally underrepresented in graduate education. Olivo met all the criteria.

The application process also required an interview, during which Olivo’s interviewer commended her for her drive and success. For one who had not received much praise for her hard work, Olivo was shocked. “It was really nice to hear someone say, ‘Wow, you beat those odds.’ You don’t really hear that,” Olivo says. Now even her father, after seeing all she has achieved, encourages his other children to attend college.

Though she has pinned down her passion, Olivo still debates the direction in which to channel it after graduate school. On one hand, she wants to teach and continue her research. On the other, she wants to become an activist, possibly working with WOW – Wider Opportunities for Women – in Washington, D.C. In fact, she wants both. “My dream is to do it all,” she says. With her ambition and her determination, she just might make that happen. 