

# Comal Independent School District

## NEWS RELEASE

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### **SVHS student defies the odds on her way to graduation walk**



Rosalina Gomez's educational path should have come to an end when she was 12 years old.

For most of the young people growing up in the Mexican city of Guanajuato, when their time in the sixth grade is over, so is their formal education.

To continue their education, students like Gomez would need their own transportation to a school dozens of miles away, which is an unlikely luxury in Guanajuato, where the average family earns the equivalence of \$6,794 U.S. dollars annually.

So when her schooling ended in Mexico in 2002, Gomez could have easily been relegated to a life of working in the farming industry, like the vast majority of her family.

Gomez had a different worldview, however, and began to journal it.

"Even though I wasn't in school, I would write about my life and my dreams of coming to America and learning a second language," Gomez said. "All I could think about was getting a better education, but since no one in my family had ever made it past the sixth grade, I never thought those dreams would become a reality."

Although education wasn't a reason for wanting to come to America, a decision Gomez's father Joaquin made when Rosalina was 12 would greatly shape her future. He applied for and received a visa to work in the United States and found employment in the landscaping industry in Idaho.

“It was difficult, because my father would be gone for eight months and then he’d come back to visit my mother, brother and me for four months,” Rosalina said. “He was just trying to earn more money for our family, so I respected that, but only being able to talk to your father over the phone those months he was away was very hard on all of us.”

Besides increasing his family’s bank account, another positive thing happened as Joaquin was making his trips back and fourth. He began to learn about the value of a good education.

By the time Rosalina was 16, Joaquin had saved enough money to move the family to the U.S. To make the transition easier, he got a job at Smithson Valley High School as a custodian.

“It was a lot better having my dad in Texas,” Rosalina said. “I think it would have been much more difficult to move to Idaho where he worked before. I was very excited when I learned we were coming to the United States.”

So, despite not knowing a single word of English, Rosalina enrolled as a freshman at SVHS in the fall of 2006.

“I didn’t know how to say anything in English,” she said. “Not, ‘How are you?’ or ‘What’s you’re name?’”

The reality of being in such a new and foreign atmosphere soon set in.

“It’s hard to describe,” Rosalina said. “All I did was cry. I felt so bad. I woke up in the morning knowing I was going to go to school and not know what the teacher or kids were saying.”

SVHS ESL (English as a Second Language) teacher Mona Daniels could sense her new student’s fear.

“I knew it was going to be very tough on her, and I was wondering how I was going to help her,” Daniels said. “I could tell by the look on her face she couldn’t understand me.”

After being thrown into the fire as a freshman, Rosalina was barely making it at SVHS. She nearly failed Algebra I and did fail the second semester of English I. Something began to change as she emerged from her four weeks of summer school and entered her sophomore year.

“Things really started to finally click in the tenth grade,” Rosalina said. “Ms. Daniels and my father told me to keep pushing myself and that one day I was going to learn this new language and would have many more opportunities. I realized this was what I wanted, and I really started to buckle down and study.”

She studied for at least three hours every night and gave up her dreams of playing on the soccer team, one of her loves in Mexico, because she knew she was going to have to become much more proficient in English to be successful in the U.S.

Her hard work paid off in a big way. Since the beginning of her sophomore year, the lowest grade Rosalina has had in any subject during a nine-week period is 85. She's even managed to make the all-A honor roll twice.

Last year, as a junior, she increased her nightly study workload to four hours per night and passed the math, social studies and science TAKS (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills) tests on her first try, and the English TAKS on her second attempt.

On May 29, Rosalina will walk across the stage at Strahan Coliseum in San Marcos and officially become a high school graduate.

"I've worked so hard," she said. "This was always my dream. What will happen in my life now has become more and more clear. I feel proud and special."

Along the way, Rosalina, and her mother and father have taken and passed the U.S citizenship test. She was also a part of teacher Wendy McCuiston's Culinary Arts team at SVHS that beat out more than 40 teams at the regional level and competed in the state FCCLA (Family, Career and Community Leaders of America) meet in Corpus Christi last year.

Rosalina also holds two jobs in San Antonio – as a waitress at Independence Hill retirement community and a team leader at Whataburger.

"Rosalina has gone from someone who would hardly make eye contact with you into a class leader," said McCuiston. "She probably has one of the best work ethics I've ever seen in a young person. You never have to ask her to do something twice, and she mentors the underclassmen through her actions alone."

Fellow ESL student Miguel Anaya said Rosalina is someone his classmates definitely look up to.

"She never gives up, no matter what it is," Anaya said. "She's always working toward her goals and a better future for herself."

Rosalina said she's sure tears will again be flowing on graduation day, but not because she can't understand her teachers or classmates like during her early days at SVHS.

"I'm for sure going to cry," she said. "I'll be very emotional."

Rosalina's immediate future is set, as the girl who at one time appeared destined to spend her life in Mexico with a sixth-grade education will be headed to San Antonio College for two years. She then plans on transferring to the University of Texas-San Antonio to finish off an undergraduate degree and earn a teaching certificate.

"I would like to either teach bilingual elementary students or ESL," she said. "It's hard to believe I'm at this point. I really feel like I've made it from the bottom to the top. Even though I lived 16 years in Mexico, I really feel my dreams, my goals and my life started when I arrived here."

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IN PHOTO: Smithson Valley High senior Rosalina Gomez will complete an amazing four years at the school when she walks across the stage to accept her diploma on May 29 during graduation ceremonies at Strahan Coliseum in San Marcos.