

News Release

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Bingo to business school: Online friendship leads to IU Kokomo degree for East Coast mom of three

KOKOMO, Ind. — When she was growing up in Manhattan, Lisa Ortega’s family told her she would never amount to much, or accomplish much in life.

Seven years ago, inspired by her pastor’s New Year’s Eve sermon, Ortega decided to prove them wrong by earning a college degree. “I decided I had to go to college for me -- not to get a job, but to make myself better,” Ortega said. “I hope my children see me as I am growing and succeeding, and they will want that, too.”

Ortega, now 42, followed her pastor’s advice, setting a series of small goals, rather than one large goal that seemed insurmountable. She earned her GED diploma, then her associate degree. Four years ago, she enrolled at IU Kokomo, with plans to earn a bachelor’s degree in business management.

“Before I got my associate degree, I didn’t have anything,” she said. “I’m excited. It feels really good to see that (bachelor’s) degree in sight. Nobody else in my family has gone past high school. I hope I can inspire them to reach higher.”

Ortega grew up in Manhattan, the daughter of Puerto Rican immigrants. She attended New York Public Schools until she became pregnant her senior year in high school.

“My mom didn’t want anything to do with me,” Ortega said. “She was disappointed in the choices I made. I stayed with the kids’ grandmother, their father’s mother, for several years. She was a rock for me. She helped me get where I needed to be, so I was able to be on my own after a few years.”

The relationship with her young children's father broke up, and Ortega later met James, now her husband. “James said, ‘You are who you are, and I accept you for

what you are," Ortega said.

She attended school from time to time, taking a few classes, but her primary focus was on raising her three children, two sons and a daughter. While her older children were in school and her younger son was napping, she started playing online bingo. During a game, she struck up what would be a life-changing friendship with another player, Kokomo resident Jennifer Parker.

Ortega and her family visited Parker in Kokomo in 2000 and fell in love with small-town life. They decided to relocate from New York to Indiana.

"We thought, 'It's so pretty out here, and in the evening, you can see stars,'" she said. "I wanted to be close to my friend, and we wanted a better life for our kids -- opportunities we never had in New York."

Ortega is not close to her own family, but she said Parker's family accepted her, her husband and their children into their family. Parker was Ortega's biggest cheerleader when she returned to school.

"I built a family out of my friends," Ortega said. "Jennifer was awesome. She was like my sister. I had a hard time transitioning when I started IU Kokomo, and she really helped me keep going."

She lost that support when Parker died of unknown causes in 2010, but she knew she had to keep going.

"I felt like, 'I can't do this,' but I had made a promise to myself. I committed to this, and I had to finish the job," she said.

Ortega lives on a strict schedule with time planned for classes, her internship at Sam's Club, studying, family time and relaxation. She also schedules in time to be involved with IU Kokomo's Students in Free Enterprise, or SIFE, a nonprofit organization that teaches an understanding of the free enterprise system.

"SIFE members help people and empowers them economically through financial education," she said. "That is a way you can help a lot of people. It also empowered me, by helping me learn to speak in front of people, and giving me connections I could not have made anywhere else."

Ortega earned her internship with Sam's Club at the SIFE regional conference in Chicago. She hopes to enter the Sam's Club management-training program after graduation.

Ortega is completing a minor in international studies, which she believes will fit in with the international business division of Sam's. She chose her minor based on her love of learning about other cultures.

"I love to meet different people, to learn about them, and to understand and respect their culture," she said. That interest led her to Guatemala with an IU Kokomo class in early 2012. While in Central America, she and other students volunteered in a school for disabled children and visited a college.

Ortega is proud of her accomplishments and hopes her dedication to earning her degree inspires her children to pursue higher education. Her older son, 23 and daughter, 20, are not interested yet, she said. Her younger son, a 17-year-old Taylor High School student, wants to attend college. She hopes the newest addition to the family -- her 2-month-old grandson -- will also go to college.

"My older children don't understand yet that college will lead them to where they want to be later in life," she said. "I'm trying to help my younger son prepare for it, so he can go when he is ready to succeed."

Ortega said that while she made poor choices earlier in her life, she learned from them, took responsibility for them and made better decisions as she grew older.

"Whatever happens in life is from choices you make," she said. "Everyone is responsible for their own choices. Some things are out of your control, but you can use it to find a way to lead you to something better. We made some big choices, and look where we are now. We have our house and a yard, and I'm about to graduate from college. I'm happy as a lark with how my life is now."

Indiana University Kokomo serves north central Indiana.

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