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“My parents came here for the same reasons everyone else does. It’s the land of opportunity, and they wanted to provide a better life for me and my sisters. They made that dream come true, even if they weren’t able to stay.”

— Karen Nava



LEILA NAVIDI

Karen Nava, 18, found herself in a difficult situation when her parents had to leave the United States in 2008 after being denied work permits. “I talked to them about how it was better for my sisters to be here, to go to school here,” she said.

EDUCATION

Double duty

UNLV freshman raised siblings while finishing high school

By TOVIN LAPAN

In the spring, Valley High School senior Karen Nava began to see the rewards of several years of hard work, dedication, and uncommon maturity and courage.

Nava, a soft-spoken 18-year-old, was set to graduate and attend UNLV. She would be the first in her family to attend college, and better yet, she had won a generous scholarship. These were exactly the kinds of opportunities Nava’s parents had hoped she would find when they entered the United States illegally before she was born.

Nava wanted nothing more than to celebrate with her parents, but the party would have to wait until August when she could travel to Acapulco.

In 2008, both of Nava’s parents returned to Mexico after they were denied work permit renewals. Nava stayed behind and took on the day-to-day responsibilities of raising her 8- and 10-year-old sisters.

Nava is now in her first semester of UNLV’s hotel management program, where she is buoyed by a scholarship from the Epicurean Charitable Foundation. Each year, the foundation chooses deserving Clark County seniors who have good grades, demonstrate a financial need, and wish to pursue a degree in culinary arts or hospitality and hotel management. Nava, one of four 2012 winners chosen from 48 applicants, will receive up to \$7,000 per year for four years to cover tuition and will be mentored by a foundation member.

To get to this point, Nava made a decision four years ago, at age 14, to skip being a typical teenager for the benefit of her family.

“Karen’s perseverance is just incredible,” said Christina Clifton, Nava’s mentor and vice president of food and beverage at Aria. “She has so much energy, intensity and passion. To have done what she has done, to have worked so hard to reach her goals while also raising her sisters, is amazing.”

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LEILA NAVIDI

Epicurean Charitable Foundation scholar Karen Nava, 18, a Valley High School graduate, seen at the foundation's headquarters in Las Vegas, interns at the Cosmopolitan.

NAVA, FROM PAGE 1:

BEING SUCCESSFUL WAS 'ABOUT SETTING GOALS' FOR STUDENT

Nava's parents crossed the border from Mexico into California in 1989. Five years later, Nava was born in Santa Ana, Calif., where her father had worked his way up from a dishwasher who spoke no English to a position proofing schematics for airplanes. Her mother was an accountant. Even though her parents had entered the country without papers, Nava said her father eventually was able to get a work permit.

In autumn 2007, Nava's father received a letter saying his permit would not be renewed. The company her father worked for declined to appeal on his behalf, Nava said, and immigration authorities said having U.S. citizen children was not good enough to keep them in the country.

Nava's father eventually took the family to Las Vegas, where he had relatives, for a final attempt to find work. Without legal documentation, he failed, and in October 2008, Nava's parents returned to Mexico.

Originally, Nava's parents took her two younger sisters to Mexico with them. But they were born and raised in the United States and spoke better English than Spanish. Nava was living with her uncle and grandmother in east Las Vegas and convinced her parents that she could handle the responsibilities of caring for them.

"First, I had to convince them to let me stay," she said. "Then I talked to them about how it was better for my sisters to be here, to go to school here. There was a moment when I said I'm not going to have this regular teenage life, and I have to get it together for my sisters. It's not their fault this happened, and they shouldn't suffer for it."

The three stayed with family, but much of the work of raising her sisters fell to Nava.

"We were able to stay with my uncle and grandmother, but everyone has their own things to do. They couldn't just take over my sisters for my parents," Nava said. "My uncle works all day and my grandmother has two jobs."

Throughout high school, Nava rose at 6 a.m. daily to get her sisters ready for school. She dropped them off at a morning tutoring program so she could get to Valley High on time and then would volunteer at the end of the day at her sisters' school. In the evening, she helped them with their school work and got them ready for bed by 7 p.m. so she could start on her own homework.

"I wouldn't get to bed until 1 a.m. a lot of nights," Nava said. "It seemed like morning came fast. Sometimes I think I only got three hours of sleep before starting all over again."

Along the way, Nava adapted so she could be there for her sisters. She was on the track team at her high school for a while, but the practices made it impossible to be there to pick up her sis-

ters. So she quit.

Somehow, she still found the time to run for office, and her senior year, she was elected president of the Valley High student body.

"It was about setting goals for myself," Nava said. "A teacher told me about the Epicurean foundation my junior year, and I set my sights on getting the scholarship. Without the scholarship, I would have relied on financial aid and things would have been much harder. So I set out to do whatever I needed to do to win it."

Meanwhile, Nava joined the Valley High magnet program in hospitality and tourism and got an internship at the Cosmopolitan of Las Vegas.

"I had never thought about the hospitality industry until I did the internship and joined the magnet program," Nava said. "But with the internship, I really got to see what the business is about. I saw that it was about helping people and making sure they have the best experience possible."

Nava's sisters are spending the fall semester in Mexico with their parents as the elder sister acclimates to college life. In January, they will return and Nava will adapt her schedule so she can squire them to school again.

"I think I have been a good influence on them," Nava said of her siblings. "When my parents first left, they were too young to understand. They've seen how hard I've worked over the last few years. When they come home they show me their work, and I'm so proud when they make honor roll. I'm going to make sure they go to college, too."

Instead of getting a high-five and extra dessert from her parents for every accomplishment along the way, Nava would log on to Skype and share the moment via an impersonal web chat. Nava fought off tears as she talked about graduating without her parents in the audience and not being able to celebrate with them the moment she heard she had won the Epicurean foundation scholarship, but she said it has all been worth it.

"My parents came here for the same reasons everyone else does," Nava said. "It's the land of opportunity, and they wanted to provide a better life for me and my sisters. They made that dream come true, even if they weren't able to stay."

The Epicurean Charitable Foundation, in its 11th year, will have its annual scholarship fundraiser, MENUS (Mentoring and Educating Nevada's Upcoming Students), Sept. 28 at the M Resort. The event features food from 30 Las Vegas restaurants and a performance by Alanis Morissette.

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