High hopes, high expectations

Jazmin Lopez, the first in her family to attend college, carries her parents' dreams with her.

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By MARIA P. GONZALEZ of the Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

WALLA WALLA -- While Jazmin Lopez watched some of her classmates' parents discourage them from college, she felt fortunate about her own parents' message.

Ema and Macabeo Lopez didn't just encourage her to finish high school -- that was a given. They pushed her, and continue to push their younger daughters, to graduate from college.

"My mom always told us we were going to college," Jazmin said. "Her goal for us was never for us to graduate from high school, but to graduate from college."

But on her path to college from high school, she found fulfilling a goal can be complicated with real-life obstacles.

Jazmin stumbled through some of those barriers, such as a lengthy application process. Then came the shock of the price-tag to earn a higher education.

"I didn't know it cost a lot," she confessed.

Finances ended up being the decision-maker, but in an unusual twist, Jazmin is attending a private college for less than a state university.

Jazmin starts her junior year at Whitman College this fall, surprised to still be in her hometown, but proud of the accomplishments she has made getting into the school and as a student earning a bachelor's degree in Spanish.

She is attending Whitman as a Lomen-Douglas scholarship recipient. The diversity scholarship is available to students who have demonstrated academic achievements and a financial need. The awards range from $2,000 to $35,000, and no specific number of the scholarships are given each year. Jazmin, a Walla Walla High School graduate who earned good grades and was involved in service clubs, earned an award high enough to cover most of her undergraduate expenses.

Her mother, Ema Lopez, found her own set of pressures as a parent in a community where Latino families are often uneducated about higher education, and who think finishing high school is a big enough accomplishment for their children.

But not for her.

Even before her daughter's birth, Ema Lopez resolved that her children would achieve greater things

with their lives than she did as a field worker, and then in the service industry. Since the moment in the hospital when Jazmin was born, Ema turned to the hospital staff to exclaim that this child would be somebody.

"They can't be like me," she said about her daughters, speaking in Spanish.

And by somebody, she meant a doctor, or a nurse. Her children would serve their community, be educated, become teachers or social workers. But more importantly, they would be good people.

The Lopezes say they owe much to their Catholic faith, and the connection to the community it offers. They belong to the St. Patrick Catholic Parish, and Ema has become a liaison to parents who also want to guide their children toward college.

She offers them advice on applying for financial aid, and seeking grants and scholarships. She will even sit someone down and help them fill out forms, if they want.

Ema owes her daughters' success in part to being involved and interested in their lives. Mom and daughters talk openly about their lives. They go to church, the movies or on a walk to get ice cream.

"The trick is to be there for them and support them," she said.

As high school graduation neared, Jazmin said some students talked about going to work right away to help their parents. Some stopped going to school altogether. Some had grown up in single-parent homes and wanted to contribute right away. Some felt pressured to do so.

"I feel lucky to have understanding parents," she said.

It's that mentality, that holds children back, that Ema says she is glad to help parents shed.

"They're missing information," she said. "They're wrong to think working is everything."

Work is key, and Ema has held her share of jobs since moving to the Walla Walla area in the 1980s. She started picking asparagus, squash, apples and cherries. She left the fields for different work, but has always been in service industries. It's not the type of work she wishes for her children.

Ema's latest job finds her close to Jazmin, in the halls of Whitman College's buildings, where she is a full-time custodian. The job allows for brief moments where mother and daughter can swap a quick hug and kiss.

"Apart from being close to my daughter, I'm happy working there," Ema said. She would love to see her other two daughters walk Whitman's halls one day, preparing their own undergraduate studies. Jennifer Lopez is a senior at Wa-Hi, Chantell Lopez is a junior.

But Ema said she will be happy wherever her children attend college.

"It's not the school that's smart, it's the child," she said.

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