

A Standout Instead of a Dropout; Education: San Fernando High student beat the odds--get accepted to MIT after becoming a single mother.

[Valley Edition]

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When Nora Cadena got pregnant at 16, she wondered if she was going to turn into another teenage statistic--a young Latina dr become a single mother.

But rather than meeting the diminished expectations of her teachers, parents and friends, she promised herself she would finist top college.

"I just wanted to be the best," Cadena, 18, said recently. "I have a baby. A lot of people stereotype me. I got it from my teachers going to drop out."

"But I had the attitude, 'I'm going to prove you wrong.' All the negative comments, all the stereotypes--that just helps me."

The young woman with long, wavy hair, lipstick and arched eyebrows stayed in school until her water broke, and returned to Sæ three days after giving birth to pick up a computer assignment, because she didn't want to fall behind.

This spring, Cadena was accepted to MIT.

In September, she will head 3,000 miles across the country to Boston with Chassitty for four years of college at one of the natic

The daughter of Mexicans who immigrated to the U.S. when she was a year old, Cadena is an example of what a young person determination.

She also provides insights into the extra motivation required of first-generation Mexican Americans, whose working-class paren education and do not know the American system well enough to provide academic advice.

In cases such as Cadena's, an encounter with an interested teacher or advice from a local graduate a few years older can char

Cadena's parents--unemployed at the moment--know from the pats on the back, the congratulatory phone calls and visits from has done something extraordinary. Even as they accompanied her from one scholarship interview to another, they did not unde

Not only had her parents never heard of MIT, they had never heard of Massachusetts.

"I just returned from Boston on a six-hour flight," Cadena said the day after spending a weekend at MIT to work out child-care a know it's far. And they know it is cold."

Cadena's father, Jesus, completed two years of vocational college in Mexico before coming to the United States; her mother, E Spanish, never finished elementary school. Jesus worked as a dishwasher for years until he and his wife got jobs at Bungee In manufactures Bungee cords. Both lost their jobs in February.

Her parents are plain-spoken and warm. They beam with pride when they speak of their daughter and their granddaughter, wh room waving her pudgy arms and legs and yelling, "TA-TA-TA!"

They say they always encouraged Cadena to study, but they could not do much more. When teachers urged Cadena to take a elementary school, her parents vetoed the idea because they did not want her to be bused to another school.

Although Cadena has taken six advanced-placement courses, they did not know what AP meant until parents at a scholarship i their daughter's academic background.

The family has so little money that Cadena works 25 hours a week at a Ross discount clothing store to help pay family food bill:

Besides her studies and her job, Cadena has been in and out of court since Chassitty's birth, fighting for custody.

But she is quiet about the subject and talks about the baby's father only when pushed--about how he is a high school dropout, stalks her, about how she had to get restraining orders against him and about how he is desperately fighting her decision to leave Chassitty with her.

Cadena says she was rebellious in junior high school, talked back to her parents and cared little about schoolwork. But when she made a decision to surround herself with students who achieved academically, said her AP history teacher, Marco Torres.

By her sophomore year, she decided she would attend an Ivy League school. But when she got pregnant, everything changed.

"She wrote me a letter," Torres said. "She said she thought it was all over. She thought she'd let everyone down, and there was no going back."

Some teachers did seem to write her off when she got pregnant, but Torres said he first noticed Cadena her junior year because she was a typical AP student. He said she was quiet and had a different persona.

"But the second day of class, she turned in an essay and I knew she was special," he said. "She was an incredible writer."

When he learned about her pregnancy, he and a small group of concerned teachers visited her parents to talk about Nora's potential importance of continuing her education.

Nora's father seems overwhelmed by all the attention paid to his family.

"When those things happen, I feel very, very proud," he said. "I feel bigger than I am, and very happy."

Jesus Perez, a senior at MIT and a graduate of San Fernando High, also helped persuade Cadena to head east for college.

Nothing gives him more pleasure, he said, than bucking the Latino stereotype, and he knows that it is the same for Cadena.

"She is a young Latina," he said. "She has a baby, and right away she gets stereotyped. And then you tell them--the judge or someone at MIT, and then--boom, there goes the jaw, like they don't think we can do that."

But Perez, Torres and even Cadena's parents take little credit for her success.

"She personifies exception," said Torres, who estimates half his ninth-graders every year either drop out, flunk out or return to school to have the same obstacles, but she overcame them."

He said when some students from Marin Academy, an expensive private high school in Northern California, visited San Fernando High last year, he could not wait to introduce them to Cadena.

"She walked in, and I said, 'This is Nora, she takes five AP classes, she also has a child, she is in an oppressive relationship, she's a single mom,'" Torres recalled. "It was like they ran a marathon and so did Nora, but Nora ran it with someone on top of her."

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