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Diploma done, mom's next dream: Doctor

By [GREG HARDESTY](#)

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IRVINE – In early May, UC Irvine student Carla Rose Plaza organized an on-campus screening of the documentary film "Girl Rising."

The film tells the stories of nine girls from nine countries who overcome daunting obstacles while getting an education. Plaza herself isn't featured in it – but she could be.

Obstacles?

She's not sure she can count all the obstacles she faced.

On June 16, when Plaza is slated to graduate summa cum laude in biochemistry and molecular biology from UCI, she'll be, at 35, among the older students getting an undergraduate diploma.

She'll almost certainly be the only one getting a diploma the same week as her son, Miguel, 17, who will graduate from Irvine's University High, just down the road, on June 18.

She'll also be among the few UCI grads who didn't speak English until she was nearly an adult. And she'll be one of the few single-mother graduates, and one of a handful of UCI grads who worked in fast food well into adulthood as a way to help support herself and her child.

Throughout her journey, Plaza never has let go of her tough-as-nails dream – to become a doctor.

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Plaza oozes positive energy and enthusiasm.

The native of Lima, Peru, is showing a visitor one of the labs inside UCI's Natural Science II building. This is where, in addition to doing her class work, Plaza spends up to 20 hours a week conducting research for professor Thomas Poulos, a well-known scholar in the fields of biochemistry, chemistry and pharmaceutical sciences.

Part of her research involves growing bacteria and extracting from it a protein to study its structure.

She points to a flask containing a brown liquid.

"Bacteria soup," Plaza says, utterly ungrossed out.

"I do this (research) because I like it," Plaza adds. "And because I'm nosy."

The research, and the classes, are light years removed from the jobs Plaza worked shortly after arriving with her mother in the United States in January 1995.

Plaza found out she was pregnant a few months after she'd immigrated to the United States with her family. The father was a boyfriend who remained in Peru. She considers getting pregnant (though not the result: Miguel) the biggest mistake of her life.

Plaza was 17, just beginning to speak English and learn about life in her new home, Downey.

But soon, instead of college, Plaza was a single mother helping her own mother cover expenses by toiling in fast-food restaurants and at gas stations – not exactly the express lane to higher education.

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The two-bedroom apartment Plaza and Miguel share in Verano Place, one of the family housing neighborhoods at UCI, is homey and clean. On this night it's also filled with the aroma of sloppy Joes, which Miguel made while his mother was at the lab.

These days, with both graduations coming fast, mother and son have little time together.

"Come on," Plaza teases Miguel as he reluctantly poses with her for a photograph. "Just like me for 10 seconds."

They're both proud of graduating, but both also see their diplomas as stepping stones to bigger things.

Miguel plans to go to community college for a couple of years and transfer to a four-year university.

And Plaza? She points to the words on a Post-it note on the computer monitor that, for years, she's seen every time she has fired up her home PC:

Carla Plaza, M.D.

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Plaza grew up in poverty in Peru, though she attended school and earned her high school diploma shortly after arriving in the United States.

Plaza, who has two younger siblings, says her interest in medicine began as a child, when she would help take her grandmother to the doctor. But having a baby at 17 interrupted the med-school dream.

Not wanting Miguel to be deprived while growing up, Plaza plunged herself into low-paying jobs while going to school at night to learn to speak English.

For about two years, she worked the counters at two fast-food restaurants, sending some of her earnings back to Peru.

She landed a part-time job as office help for a doctor in Bell, and there she devoured back copies of the New England Journal of Medicine and other medical periodicals. She also took a class in medical terminology and, in her mid-20s, squeezed in general education courses at Cerritos College.

"I just love to learn," says Plaza. "I was a sponge."

Plaza married when her son was 4 but that union ended six years later. She became a U.S. citizen in December 2008.

Around the time of her divorce, Plaza met with an Army recruiter on behalf of her brother. When she learned that the Army could feed her dream of becoming a doctor if she became a medic, she signed up.

She spent two years in the Army on active duty and then joined the Army National Guard. After finishing her lower-division courses, Plaza was accepted three years ago at UCI. Financial aid made it possible to pursue an undergraduate degree.

While in school, and raising Miguel, and working, Plaza has landed several scholarships. One required her to talk with kids in underserved communities about going to college. Another sent her to India to help fight infectious diseases.

She's also managed to work in time to be a Big Sister to a 13-year-old girl.

Plaza explains her apparent ability to bend time this way:

"When you feel beat up, but you know people are depending on you, you pull your strength out of somewhere and keep going."

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Her plan is to take the Medical College Admission Test later this summer. Her hope is to get accepted into medical school. Her hope on top of that other hope is to serve her residency at a military hospital.

But before all that, she's got some celebrating to do.

Plaza will be the first in her family to graduate from college. And Miguel will get his diploma barely 48 hours after that.

So how will the pair – who watch their money very closely – celebrate?

"I'm planning to go home and watch a movie," Plaza says. "I haven't seen a movie in a long time."

Not, in fact, since "Girl Rising."

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