UC SANTA BARBARA

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Jim Logan

A Life Rebooted

Ron Jimenez was not on the college track. His high school GPA was 1.5. He dropped out a week before graduation. Higher education wasn't an option — or even a consideration.

Fast-forward nearly two decades. Jimenez, now 35 and married, is about to earn a bachelor's degree in anthropology from UC Santa Barbara, the first in his family to graduate from college.

"I never thought in a million years that I would have any sort of degree," he said. "I was very disenchanted with school when I was younger."

Jimenez's progression from high school dropout to dean's list scholar eager to attend graduate school is a tale of working-class America, where the slippery dream of a better life rests in a higher education system often seen as remote and inaccessible.

"I didn't know how to go to college," he said. "My grades were terrible and I didn't think anyone would accept me, and I thought college was super expensive. Which it is, but I didn't know anything about grants and scholarships. I didn't know what financial aid was. I thought your parents had to pay for it, and my parents weren't going to be able to."

After high school Jimenez, who grew up 15 minutes from Disneyland in La Mirada, found himself working in retail, which led to a job as a bank teller and, eventually, a sales and service position with Chase Bank. The money was good, he said, "but I was kind of miserable doing it." After a while his health suffered, so he took some

time off and underwent therapy for anxiety and depression.

He bounced back, but he wasn’t ready to go back. As it happened, his mother-in-law, Kelly Birrell, was struggling to find work. “So she said, ‘OK, I’m going to go back to school then,” ’ he said. “And she kind of dragged me with her.”

But before they both enrolled, Birrell found a job. Jimenez, who wasn’t sure he even wanted to go to college, thought he had a way out. His wife, Elizabeth Jimenez, wasn’t having it. “I was like, ‘I don’t want to do this by myself,’ ” he said. “But my wife’s like, ‘No, you’re going.’ ”

He started at Long Beach City College with a couple of subjects he enjoyed, English and history, and figured he’d give it his best shot, though he couldn’t guarantee he’d finish the semester.

“A couple of years later,” Jimenez said, “I’d been focusing so much on not failing that I was on the dean’s list and had scholarships left and right. I maintained a 4.0 GPA almost the whole way.”

Not surprisingly, he was accepted at multiple universities, and chose UC Santa Barbara for its emphasis on undergraduate education and proximity to family. It was also, by happy coincidence, where his best friend from LBCC, Jessica Lizardo, attended. (Jimenez, in the tradition of good friends everywhere, spells her name “lizard, with an ‘o’ on the end.”)

Jimenez has thrived at UCSB through the usual combination of hard work and determination, but he’s also been propelled by a profound sense of gratitude.

“The way I see it,” he said, “I’m going as far as I can because my wife, my grandparents, my parents, my aunts and uncles, every boss and co-worker I’ve ever had, and all my friends — they’ve all gotten me here.

“My parents worked so hard for so little when I was a kid, and we were always barely skating by and everything,” Jimenez continued. “I didn’t think I would have the opportunity to do anything beyond that and now that I do I’m going to take it as far as I can.”

But there’s more. He tells of learning that his maternal grandmother, Cecelia Carey, was close to earning her bachelor’s degree in anthropology at Cal State Long Beach when she got married and had a baby. After taking some time off to have more

children, she went back to finish her degree. University administrators, however, told her she had to start all over.

“And so she said, ‘OK, well I guess that’s it,’ ” Jimenez said.

He also gets inspiration from his late grandfather, William Carey, who grew up poor in northern Canada wanting to be an astronomer.

“In the ’50s in rural Canada,” Jimenez said, “his dad was like, ‘OK, that’s cute. But you’re going to learn a trade and you’re going to get a real job.’

“So this quarter, my last quarter here,” he added, “I’m taking an astronomy class for my granddad. I feel like in a way it’s kind of making his journey come full circle. Whatever I do after this it’s definitely going to be for him and my grandmother who didn’t get to finish.”

Looking ahead, Jimenez plans to attend graduate school for his Ph.D., possibly in behavioral ecology. Potential good fits are UC Berkeley, University of British Columbia and University of Florida. After that he’d like to teach at the community college level.

In the meantime, he and Elizabeth, who earned a bachelor’s degree in marine biology from Cal State Long Beach, want to explore the Santa Barbara region, something they’ve been too busy to do. Besides, Jimenez said, she’s due.

“I feel bad because I moved her away from down there and now we’re probably going to move away when I go to grad school,” he said. “So things are a little up in the air. She never complains. She’s always, ‘We did my thing now let’s do your thing so we can do our thing.’

“She’s my driving force,” Jimenez added. “Every success I’ve had over the last 14 years has been directly influenced by her encouragement.”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society.

All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.