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Erika Gamboa - Call of duty

By *FELLEY LAWSON SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE* September 4, 2011

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SELF PORTRAIT

Date and place of birth: Feb. 23, 1974, in El Paso, Texas

Favorite movie: Sixteen Candles

Best advice my mom ever gave me: "Get the education I was never able to receive."

The secret to managing time: Making time to reflect on what I'm doing.

People would be surprised to know that I yell at the TV when the Razorbacks are playing.

Every day, I read: Besides email, I read CNN, ABC and the newspaper online.

My pet is a dog, Ty. He was the runt of his litter, but he thinks he can take on everyone. He's the king of the house.

One word to sum me up: Blessed

In the school of life, experience can be a pretty harsh teacher. Erika Gamboa grew up in a public housing project in Albuquerque, N.M. Her dad is a ninth-grade dropout; her mom has never been to school.

At 17, Gamboa took a full-time job to help support her family after her parents separated. She had always been an honor student and managed to stay in school while she worked, but her grades suffered under the weight of her responsibilities at home. Gamboa had long been determined to go to college, but as high school graduation approached, she was told by a guidance counselor that she really shouldn't bother.

Now, 20 years and three undergraduate degrees later, the Fayetteville resident is a veteran of the U.S. Army Reserve and serves as director of the Veterans Resource and Information Center at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville. Mother to a 16-year-old daughter, Marisa, she's also well on her way toward earning a second master's degree at UA.

"My life is one big blessing," Gamboa says.

Her success comes as no surprise to anyone who knows her. Even meeting her for the first time, it's easy to see that she's bright, engaging and accomplished.

The surprise is that she could ever have been so drastically underestimated.

"Erika is fearless," says Carol Altom, director of UA's Veterans Upward Bound program. "She doesn't give up on anything or anyone."

NO FREE RIDES

Gamboa's path hasn't always been easy, but she's a positive thinker who has tackled her challenges with resolve. Experience has taught her that no one should be defined by his circumstances, and that there's great joy in helping make the road a little easier for others. Motivated by empathy and generosity of spirit, she goes about her work continually looking for ways she can help student veterans make the move from active duty to campus life.

She says there are almost 500 veterans and veterans' dependents enrolled at UA for the fall 2011 semester who are receiving military educational benefits. Among them, all branches of the military and their Reserve components are represented, as well as the U.S. Army National Guard. These students come to college from all over the world; their ages and circumstances vary greatly. Providing for their needs, Gamboa says, "is not a one-size-fits-all kind of deal."

Often, student veterans are "going from being in war to being in college. It can be a difficult transition," Gamboa says. Her office is "the one place they can come and ask for information, and get the information they weren't even sure they were asking for."

In November 2008, UA Chancellor Dave Gearhart set to work a committee of faculty, staff and students who came up with 19 recommendations for how the university could best serve student veterans. Chaired by Josette Cline, the task force filed its report March 2, 2009. Topping the list was a suggestion to create one place on campus where veterans could learn what they need to know about the admissions process and find tools for navigating campus life once they're enrolled.

That place is the Veterans Resource and Information Center, which opened in July 2009. Gamboa is its first director.

The change from active military duty to student life can be hard, she says. "In the military, you know your role. Some feel like asking for help is a sign of weakness, like they should already know everything they need. But how do you know if it's something new?"

Services available through the Resource and Information Center include help with application and enrollment forms, tutoring, housing, employment and benefits. Students can learn about financial aid, including scholarships for veterans and their dependents offered through a partnership with the Pat Tillman Foundation. Alumni on the Veterans Resource and Information Board raise money for scholarships and a student emergency fund. Scholarships are also awarded by the university and by the Northwest Arkansas Military Officers Group.

Gamboa says one of the biggest misconceptions about student veterans is that they all get a free ride when they enroll.

"That's not the reality," she says. "They need places to live, transportation, clothing,

sometimes child care, and all of that has to be paid for. Some might not have money for deposits because they're waiting for benefits, which don't come in until after school starts."

ONE VET TO ANOTHER

Gamboa understands how important it is for veterans to be made aware of money that's available to them to help pay for college. She was a single mother rearing baby Marisa on her own when she first attended Albuquerque Technical Vocational Institute. She didn't know about grants and scholarships for which she was eligible. The tuition payment she made out of pocket was supplemented by a work-study assignment where she learned about financial aid for the first time.

Student veterans often have to clear a unique set of hurdles when preparing for college, especially if they're coming to campus from active duty.

"Everything stops when calls come in to our office from the field," Gamboa says. Sometimes they're from prospective students; other times, Gamboa might find herself talking with a parent on duty overseas who wants to transfer benefits to a child, for example.

"Those calls are very humbling, to see how important education is to them and to their dependents," she says. "I'm always asking myself, 'How can I make the process as easy as possible?'"

To that end, Gamboa has become a walking, talking handbook on veterans' issues. She's like that friend in high school who was the perfect lab partner - always patient and prepared, always in a good mood, always able to recall instructions and assignments on the spur of the moment. She works at staying informed and is always available to share what she knows with students.

"The students trust me, and I take that trust very seriously," she says. "I treat them like I would want my own child to be treated. If I'm not aware of an answer, I'm going to research it. I make calls to everybody.

"We've got great collaboration, inside and outside the office," she continues. "Every department on campus has stepped up to see what they can do for our veterans."

Gamboa's workday is full, and quitting time quite often sneaks up on her. But she seems to like it that way. After all, she says, for student veterans who've been on active duty, "Their job isn't 8 to 5 when they're overseas."

The Veterans Resource Center shares a suite on the sixth floor of the Arkansas Union with Off Campus Connections - a resource for all undergraduates living off campus, including nontraditional and transfer students, as well as student veterans. Working near Gamboa, Off Campus Connections Associate Director Susan Stiers can tell when Gamboa is about to meet with a student.

"She's totally focused. It's like flipping a switch - that person she's talking with right then, they know they have her full attention," Stiers says. Because Gamboa is also a veteran, "The students know she's been there. It means so much that she understands, and appreciates that everybody has a different journey."

Jason Cates, a native of Southern California, spent 13 years in the Army, including one tour of duty in Iraq, and is pursuing a bachelor's degree in social work at UA. He met Gamboa when she was an academic counselor in the Veterans Upward Bound program at UA. Cates says that because Gamboa is a fellow veteran, "This made me that much more comfortable discussing the details of my particular situation. Often, it's easier for vets to talk with vets."

Gamboa says, "I hear some amazing stories from people who come through my office. They have such hurdles - I'm in awe of what they do, how they overcome them." The same might be said of her.

GOOD IN EVERYONE

Born in El Paso, Texas, Gamboa moved as an infant with her mother, Esther, just across the border to Juarez, Mexico. Esther Gamboa, a native of Mexico, was never able to go to school and can't read or write.

"As soon as she was walking, she was working, picking up aluminum cans to sell. Her family was really, really poor," Gamboa says. "What you hear about Third World countries, that was my mom's childhood."

Because of expenses such as uniforms, attending school was out of the question for her mother. "If there was money, it was going to be spent on food."

When Gamboa was a toddler, her mother married Oscar Gamboa, who did migrant work in the United States to support the family back in Juarez, where the couple's two younger daughters were born. While he was working as a mechanic in Albuquerque, a bus ran over his legs, leaving him with a limp. His wife and children moved there to be with him. The family grew to include a son, and Albuquerque became home. Her parents are permanent residents of the United States.

Poverty and gang violence were part of life in the projects where the Gamboas lived. "The conventional wisdom was that nobody who lived there could be anything but a hoodlum," Gamboa says. "We had tons of labels, because it was a bad neighborhood."

Even as a child, Gamboa set goals that weren't limited by her surroundings. And she challenged her friends to do the same.

Brenda Chavez is one of Gamboa's best friends. They met during the summer before they started fourth grade, when the Chavez family moved into the projects, two houses down from the Gamboas.

"Erika brought me out of my shy zone because she was so energetic, and such an extrovert," Chavez recalls. "As long as I can remember, Erika has always inspired me because she talked about going to college. [She] was a great student, always studying before we could play."

Over time, "Erika's dreams of college began to dwell in my dreams, and the possibilities became vivid," she adds. "Through all the opposition we faced growing up, she kept me positive. I support my children with the same support Erika gave me all those years, which is, 'Your dreams are possible, and college is a stepping stone to a successful

future."

Every year, Gamboa and her siblings were outfitted for school with donations from a nonprofit organization in Albuquerque called The Storehouse. Today, Gamboa divides her own donations: Half stay in Fayetteville, and half are loaded in her car for the 12-hour drive home to visit family. In Albuquerque, she delivers them to The Storehouse.

"They're on my list if I ever win the lottery," she says.

Because Gamboa's parents spoke very little English, from the time she started school she always translated for them everything her teachers said during conferences. "Being the obedient child that I was," she recalls, "I translated verbatim."

Her parents had important lessons to teach her, too. Even though money was scarce, the Gamboas always showed their children the importance of sharing what they had and helping others.

Erika Gamboa remembers her dad inviting homeless people to have dinner with the family during her brother's fifth birthday party. Once, her mom discovered that a woman with whom she'd struck up a friendship riding the bus to and from work was about to be homeless. "So she brought her in to live with us."

At 14, Gamboa began working summer jobs, but maintaining A's on her report card was her priority during the school year. When her parents separated three years later, she went to work full time managing a pizza parlor. Gamboa stayed in school, but couldn't maintain her grades as she always had. So when she talked with guidance counselors at her high school about what she'd do after graduation, "They didn't see the potential in me to go to school," she remembers. "I was told I should just go look for a job."

"Having been judged that way [affected] me greatly. You should never judge a person based on appearances, because you don't know them," she adds. "I don't set limits on people, and I don't set expectations on people. In everyone, there's something good, and something we're working on."

TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE

With permission from both her parents, Gamboa enlisted in the U.S. Army Reserve when she was 17. In addition to helping her mother with family expenses, she saved for college. After Marisa was born, she enrolled in Albuquerque Technical Vocational Institute. She'd been told when she enlisted that she would receive benefits from the Army, but she didn't know whom to ask, or what to ask about. She assumed she should pay for college out of her own savings.

Gamboa achieved the rank of Army specialist and worked from 1991-1999 as a single channel radio operator, installing and operating equipment and encoding and decoding communications.

Though she was never deployed, she considered making the Army her career, "but I chose to be a mom instead."

Training, work and fulltime motherhood soon relegated college to the back burner, so Gamboa dropped out for a while. As a single mom, "I had to feed my child. I did not

want to get state or federal assistance - I figured I was capable of working, so I did."

She returned to school at Albuquerque Technical Vocational Institute in 1997. This time around, she'd learned about work-study, then financial aid. A single-parent scholarship program helped, too. She received an associate degree in liberal arts in 2000, then went on to the University of New Mexico, where she earned dual bachelor's degrees in criminology and Spanish in 2004.

After hearing about the graduate program in higher education at the University of Arkansas, she flew to Fayetteville to take a look. "I thought, 'This place is too good to be true!'" she remembers. In the fall of 2004, she and Marisa moved into Gregson Hall, where Gamboa worked as a graduate resident assistant. She says Marisa tagged along at least once to every one of her 12 classes. "She loved college!"

While pursuing her master's degree, Gamboa served as a graduate assistant in two programs that serendipitously equipped her well for her current post: the Education Talent Search, which helps students in grades 6-12 get ready for college, and Veterans Upward Bound, which does the same for veterans who've been honorably discharged following at least 180 days of active duty.

Gamboa is very close to her family and had planned to return to New Mexico after graduation. But she and Marisa came to love Fayetteville, and Gamboa realized she loved working with veterans.

"I didn't realize how much of a difference I could make, even if it was just helping them fill out a form," she says. So when she graduated in 2006 with a master's degree in education, she went to work full time with Veterans Upward Bound. Then in July 2009, she moved to the Veterans Resource and Information Center.

"I'm thankful that the chancellor was behind this," Gamboa says. "He's 100 percent supportive; whatever needs to be done for veterans, he's always behind it."

Gamboa is also a presence in the classroom. With Danette Heckathorn, a mental-health clinician, Gamboa co-teaches a class called "Boots to Books: Healthy Transitions for Military Personnel." She's involved in campus life as vice president of the Latino Alumni Society, which was started in 2010. Gamboa says that when the group receives its charter, UA will be the only university in the Southeastern Conference with a Latino and a Black Alumni Society.

She's hitting the books again, too, pursuing a second master's degree - this time, in counseling, "to give better services to my students."

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