

Migrant worker finds new life at college

When Cynthia Flores was just 11 years old, she was hoeing cotton in Louisiana with her family in order to provide adequate income. Today, she is the first member of her family to earn a college degree. Flores graduated from South Arkansas Community College on May 9 with an Associate of Applied Science Degree as a Physical Therapist Assistant.

"My younger sister will also be graduating this month from Louisiana Tech University with a B.S. in Finance," Flores said, "but I'm going to finish first."

Earning her college degree has been a challenge for Flores and offers a greater reward for her than just "graduating before her sister."

In 2001, Flores, who lives in Wisner,



Flores

La., a two-hour, one-way commute to El Dorado, decided to pursue a degree as a physical therapist assistant. At the time, she was working as a physical therapist tech in Winnsboro, La. "And I loved it," she said. "I loved the idea of helping people." However, physical therapist techs have only minimal patient contact, and Flores wanted to do more.

"Someone said that I should go to PTA school," she said. She learned that there was a program available in Bossier City, La., and at South Arkansas Community College. She said she had heard good things about the College and gave SouthArk a call. "Everyone was so helpful when I called," she said. "I talked to Ms. Lillie (Wright, in the registrar's office) and knew I had to come here."

And with a little help from federal education

grants and student loans and a lot of emotional support from her family and friends, Flores has made her dreams come true.

However, Flores had to work hard to make those dreams come true. "I had been going to school since 1993," Flores said. "I would go to school, then have to drop out to go back to work, and then I would go back. It's been a struggle for 10 years."

Achieving high academic standards while trying to support herself and her family, was a difficult task for Flores. In fact, she was on academic probation when she started at SouthArk and had to enroll in basic studies, or remedial courses. However, it didn't take Flores long to turn that around.

"I now have a 3.5 cumulative GPA, am a member of PTK (the two-year college honor society) and was named as the Outstanding PTA graduate," Flores said.

For the past two years, Flores has worked hard to achieve her goals, but she is no stranger to hard work. Born in Edinburg, Texas, she was the one of four daughters of a migrant farming family. When she was very young, in the early 1980s, her family moved from Texas to Louisiana for work.

"We all worked," Flores said. "When I was 11 or 12, I was in the fields, hoeing cotton and working behind the tromping trailers." She said all the adults and children worked in the fields.

Her mother is still working with migrant workers, Flores said, now as a manager of housing for migrant workers in Tallulah, La. Flores no longer works in the fields as a migrant farmer, but said that her experiences growing up in a Hispanic family and working as a migrant farmer will help her in the future.

"I am bilingual," Flores said, "and a lot of migrants go to hospitals for therapy and there is no one there to translate. I will be able to translate and relate to them."

Once Flores graduates, she will have her degree and her choice of jobs, with annual salaries beginning at \$40,000 or more.

"None of this would have been possible without the support of my three sisters - Veronica, Sonia and Isabel - and my mother, Fela," Flores said.



contributor

Just the right touch

Cynthia Flores, who used to hoe cotton in the fields of Louisiana, received her associates degree May 9 from South Arkansas Community College, thanks to her hard work and the support of her mother and three sisters.