

MIAMI-DADE COUNTY MAY 5, 2016 9:00 AM

# Top marks: When moms and kids attend college together

## HIGHLIGHTS

As more women return to campus, many of them are parents who must juggle their studies with family and work

A Miami mother, her son and her future son-in-law recently graduated with nursing degrees from Miami Dade College

A mother and son who graduated from Nova Southeastern University now want to get graduate degrees



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For the past couple of years, whenever Marta Ross and Eduardo Daniel Martin studied for a test, or worked on a project, or put in the required hours for their nursing practicum, a spirit of competition would inevitably surge between mother and son. *Healthy* competition, that is.

"We pushed each other to do better," said Ross, 49. "I knew that I had to set an example."

Added Martin, 29: "She was always right behind me, motivating me. She made me want to try more."

Dr. Elisa Rodriguez, one of their nursing professors at Miami Dade College Medical Campus, didn't know Ross and Martin — and another nursing student, Reynaldo Garcia, who will marry Ross' oldest daughter in August — were related until their second or third course together. But then she recognized how their moral support helped them. "I think working together made them work harder," she said.

Ross, Martin and Garcia received their Bachelors of Science in nursing last weekend, giving the Miami family something extra to celebrate this Mother's Day. The journey, however, was far from easy. The three held down full-time jobs while attending college. Ross works the night shift at Mercy Hospital's oncology floor and Martin has a day shift at Jackson Memorial Hospital's pediatric bone marrow transplant unit. Garcia is a Broward firefighter.

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Marta Ross

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However, taking the nursing courses together, most of them online, helped them stick it out semester after semester. They also teamed up on special projects. The three attended a week-long class on nursing ethics in Tennessee, for example, and completed their practicum hours in Santo Domingo with a group of Mercy Hospital physicians.

Another benefit: "We didn't have to buy three books," quipped Ross. "We could share."

As more women return to college campuses, many of them are mothers who must juggle their studies with family responsibilities and, sometimes, with job duties. More than a quarter of all undergraduate students, or 4.8 million, are raising dependent children, according to the Institute for Women's Policy Research. Of those, women make up 71 percent of that group.

And while no one knows how many of these mothers are attending college along with their children, educators believe that number has been growing over the years. The Great Recession and corporate downsizing has forced middle-aged workers back to school to reinvent themselves, but many also choose to hit the books for intellectual stimulation and to enhance their skills.

Karen Reinford-Perez, 46, and son Richard Perez, 30, are part of that trend. They graduated from Nova Southeastern University in Davie last year, with Bachelors of Science degrees in paralegal studies. Karen, who has worked at Nova for two decades, had always wanted to attend college, but “I didn’t have the courage. I didn’t think I was ready and I was busy as a single parent raising my son,” she said.

When Richard, who also works at NSU, applied, she decided her time had arrived. Taking courses together helped both of them persevere. “We were each others’ driving force,” said Richard. “It helped us excel.”

Still, some classes were something of a slog. “College algebra at 40 was no joke,” Karen admitted.

The experience, however difficult, brought them closer, though they occasionally found themselves on competing sides, too. “There were times we did case briefs or argued cases opposite from each other,” she added, “and that made for some interesting conversation afterward.”

Though the Perezes got a late start, neither is finished with their education. Richard is planning to attend law school this fall and Karen, who had dreamed of becoming an attorney when she was younger, wants to get a master’s degree in health law.

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“I think he’s gotten the message that you can accomplish what you want at any age, but you have to work at it,” Karen Perez said. “You have to sacrifice, you have to give up weekends to study, but it’s worth it.”

For Ross and her son Martin, the sacrifice, too, has proved worthwhile. Ross, who had an accounting degree from a university in Pinar del Rio, began working as a certified nursing assistant at Mercy as soon as she arrived from Cuba with her three children 11 years ago.

When husband Ignacio Martin joined them a year later, she decided it was time to head back to school. She became a licensed practical nurse and then a registered nurse, before entering the Bachelor of Science program at Miami Dade College in 2014. (That’s where she met her future son-in-law, Garcia, who was also in the same program.)

“My husband deserves a lot of credit for this,” she said. “He worked and worked and worked to make sure all of us were able to go to school.”

Her oldest daughter, Ana Martin, 23, who’s a substitute teacher and private tutor, will begin a master’s degree at Florida International University and her youngest, Patricia Martin, 18, is planning to pursue a nursing degree after she receives her associate of arts. (Ana is marrying Reynaldo.)

For Eduardo, going into nursing was strongly influenced by his mother’s own experience in the field. She encouraged him to volunteer at Mercy Hospital to get a feel for the profession. “At first I was financially motivated. I was interested because I knew there were a lot of job opportunities,” he said. “But then as I did the work, I really began to love it.”

Like his mother, he began working as an LPN before completing his registered nurse requirements and then his bachelor’s degree. “I don’t know if I would’ve done it without her,” he added.

Ross hopes that her efforts will serve as an example to her children. “I might not be able to leave them money as an inheritance, but I can always leave them an education.”



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