

## Discovering his Compassion for Patients Guided Student to Nursing Career

For a student who came to the United States at age 17, didn't speak English and was working as a farmworker, College of the Sequoias (COS) provided the education and resources that led Manuel Acuna to be the first in his family to graduate from college and launch a rewarding career in nursing. "If you know what you want, COS has all the programs to help you be successful," said Acuna, who earned Associate of Science in Registered Nursing from COS, is working as a nurse at the Kaweah Health hospital in Visalia and is pursuing a Bachelor of Science in Nursing at California State University (CSU), Fresno.

Success did not come easy to Acuna who first had to learn English and earn the General Education Diploma (GED) before attending college. "While working on farms, I went to adult school to learn English as a Second Language (ESL)," said Acuna. "Becoming more fluent in English opened new doors to construction jobs."

After several years of working and studying, Acuna came to COS to continue his ESL classes. "When a construction job ended, I heard about the two-semester electrician program at COS," said Acuna. "I was nearly done with the electrician program when I met a lot of nursing students in a chemistry class who encouraged me to check out the COS nursing program."

The idea of becoming a nurse intrigued Acuna. "Many people don't think of nursing as a career for men, but when I was a little boy, the male nurse who took care of my mother made an impression on me," said Acuna. "I was nearly done with the electrician program so it seemed out the question to change to nursing. I had to really think though this new interest in medicine."

COS offered an intensive six-week Certified Nursing Assistant course that Acuna enrolled in with his wife's support to decide his career path. "I had no experience but I had a chance to help in a nursing home," said Acuna. "It wasn't



pleasant work to clean up a comatose patient, but I had a job to do. I was really surprised when I felt a surge of compassion while helping that patient and suddenly knew what career I wanted to pursue.”

Acuna indicated that this switch in career plans would not have been possible without his wife’s unwavering encouragement. “Her work supported our family so I could go back to college to take general education classes and prerequisites for the nursing program,” said Acuna. “The COS Student Access and Ability Center was very helpful in providing a computer to do homework, offering printing services and connecting me with scholarships to pay for gas and expenses.”

To help support his family while earning an Associate Degree General Education, Acuna was able to get an on-campus job. “Cindy Williams at the Tutorial Center offered me a job,” said Acuna. “I was able to study and help others right on campus. And, I kept the job during COVID because I could tutor online.”

Getting into a nursing school is very competitive, according to Acuna. “I worked hard and earned straight A’s,” said Acuna. “I applied to COS as well as other schools that accepted me but I really wanted to continue on at COS where everything was familiar. It was a miracle that someone dropped out of the COS nursing program at the last minute and I was offered the spot.”

Once securing a coveted spot in the COS nursing program, Manuel dedicated himself to studying and helping others, explained Division Chair, Nursing and Allied Health, COS and Assistant Director of Nursing, Tina Toth. “Manuel was a wonderful student,” said Toth. “He is dedicated, enthusiastic and has a very positive attitude. Manuel worked very hard and excelled in my course. He was always willing to help others; for example, he happily agreed to mentor another Spanish-speaking nursing student.”

According to Acuna, the nursing faculty was very helpful. “The instructors are there to help you and explain concepts,” said Acuna. “Since I was 30 years old and in a different life stage from many of students, I had a hard time finding a study partner. My instructor introduced me to a classmate and we formed a study group.”

One of the things that impressed Acuna about COS was the dedication of the COS Director of Nursing, Belen Kersten. “Ms. Kersten was very involved with the students in our class,” said Acuna. “If we had a need, she’d find a way to

connect us with resources. She helped with getting lab coats and telling us about companies that were offering funding to students.”

Kersten indicated that Manuel stood out as an A student. “Manuel was serious about becoming a nurse,” said Kersten. “He approached nursing school as his primary focus.”

COS helped Acuna apply for clinical experience. “During the third semester, the Career Center staff was so helpful when I applied for student nursing assistant positions,” said Acuna. “My experience was working in construction and on a farm, so I didn’t have a resume. They made my resume look professional and helped me emphasize the skills required for the job.”



Acuna successfully secured a position as a student nursing assistant with Kaweah Health. “During the fourth semester, the hospital offered me a student nursing intern position,” said Acuna.

According to Keri Cochran Ward, Professor of Nursing, COS, Acuna was eager to learn. “Manual is smart, has great critical thinking skills, shows compassion and empathy to all his patients, has a great work ethic and was well liked by fellow classmates,” said Ward. “He was at the top of his class, despite raising three kids, being a husband and father, and working part-time as a student nurse intern.”

Acuna graduated with an Associate of Science Degree in Registered Nursing from COS, became a nurse at Kaweah Health hospital and started at CSU Fresno aiming to earn a Bachelor of Science in Nursing. “I would definitely recommend COS,” said Acuna. “COS is not too small or too big, so it is easy to get involved and get to know students, faculty and staff.”

COS Student Success Coordinator, Daisy Guzman, indicated that Acuna sought out many of the services that college had to offer to help him reach his goals. “Manuel utilized many of our wrap-around services, from scholarships and on-campus work to interview preparation and clothing,” said Guzman. “Manuel is an amazing individual who knew when to ask for help.”

Guzman says that she is proud of the way COS goes all out to help students beyond the classroom. “When there are barriers, the team finds a way to bring them down,” said Guzman. “Manual was a student who put himself out there, and persevered through a very challenging program by seeking out services that contributed to his success.”

Manuel was driven to get an education by his desire to provide for his family. “Going to college at COS and becoming a nurse has allowed me to get better employment and create opportunities for my family,” said Acuna. “And, I get great satisfaction seeing patients leave the hospital in better health than when they arrived.”

