

Dad grad's tenacity inspires family

The SLCC graduate has earned straight A's after going back to school in his 40s

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David Lopez Cuellar, graduating today, will be cheered by... (Chris Detrick/The Salt Lake Tribune)

When David Lopez Cuellar walks across the stage to receive his associate's degree from Salt Lake Community College today, he wants to inspire a certain group in the audience: his children.

"I want them to say, 'If dad can do it, I can do it,' " said Cuellar, a 48-year-old father of eight.

The straight-A student is graduating with honors after completing a two-year diesel systems technology program at SLCC. He will join 2,876 others earning diplomas.

"It was an opportunity I could not pass up," Cuellar said. "I always wanted a college degree. I just never thought I'd get one this late in life."

Cuellar six years ago lost his job when the factory where he worked outsourced labor to Mexico. He applied and qualified for retraining assistance through the Utah Department of Workforce Services. The program paid for his schooling as long as he maintained a good grade point average.

That wasn't a problem. Demonstrating the row of A's on his college transcript, Cuellar said it was great hearing his children tell him, "Dang, Dad, we didn't know you were so smart."

Elicia Cuellar, 26, said her dad has always been "pushy" about education and moving forward.

Watching him complete his two-year program strengthens her own resolve. "To see my dad do something, it doesn't cross my mind one bit that I can't do it, too."

Returning to school after so many years was hard, but Cuellar said his primary goal was to follow through so he could provide for his family. He also wanted to be a role model to his kids, age 1 to 28.

"I tell them to stay in school and be somebody. This was a perfect opportunity for me to practice what I preached."

Cuellar is the first member of his family formally educated beyond high school. The son of a California migrant field worker, he remembers his mother working many long hours under the hot sun. When he was old enough, he and his brother joined her in the fields.

His mother advised her children that education was important because without it, they would have to work hard for the rest of their lives.

Remembering the hard days of work in the fields, Cuellar said he doesn't want his children to have to do the same.

"I want them to be better than me, to work smarter, not harder," Cuellar said.

After graduating from high school, Cuellar started college, but left soon after to support a family of his own. It took him 27 years to return.

"Getting this degree, walking across the stage, it's not only for me. It's for the whole family," Cuellar said. "If just one follows my footsteps. It would be great. And if they don't know what to do with their lives maybe this will help guide them."

Cuellar is one of 616 graduates earning an associate of applied science. With his certificate a few days away, Cuellar said he will begin his search for employment.

Thankful for the service that allowed him to go back to school, Cuellar said it is something he has paid into his whole life but never thought he would have to use.

"I'm going to miss it," Cuellar said of school. "But I have to get back into the work force."

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