

STOCKTONSpeaks!

OLIVIA SOSA

While growing up, people are told many things, like “stand up straight,” “chew with your mouth closed,” “respect your elders,” and other such exhortations. For too many of us, much of this sort of advice seems to go in one ear and out the other . . .

Olivia Sosa was told to stay in school and get an education. This she did not forget. It is something that has stuck with her throughout her life. Graduating from the University of the Pacific, Olivia followed this advice and continues learning, as a successful businesswoman.

Olivia’s parents couldn’t afford to go to school. As youngsters, they were needed to contribute to the survival of their families. Because of their own poverty and struggles, they realized how important education was particularly in America. Drawing from their experience, her parents constantly urged Olivia and her brothers to study and get good grades, even if they had other chores that needed to be done.

Olivia began her education in Mexico, where she was born. She attended kindergarten through second grade, learning to read and write in Spanish. At the age of seven, she moved with her family to East Los Angeles. According to Olivia, this event had great impact on her life. Had she stayed in Mexico, her educational opportunities would have been limited. Her family was poor and found comfort by living in Latino communities when they moved to California. These communities were particularly supportive because neither of Olivia’s parents speaks English. Therefore, when she was young, she was responsible to translate for her parents.

Her father was a laborer and a musician; her mother worked in a factory. Together, they worked hard to support their family. Olivia is the oldest of their children. After her birth came the births of her four brothers, Joe, Eduardo, Manuel, and Victor. As she was growing up, she had very close relationships with her siblings as well as with an extended family of aunts, uncles, and cousins.

In time, Olivia's grandmother came to live with them. She looks back fondly to the days that she spent with her grandmother. They would talk about life, God, and other things that nurture a growing girl. The two enjoyed many happy hours while the older woman taught young Olivia to sew. One very special day, she received the gift of her grandmother's sewing machine. It was a momentous occasion and a defining moment for Olivia. The gift was more than a machine. For Olivia, the gift meant that she was trusted and respected by her beloved grandmother. Olivia was always proud of her grandmother, so wise and wonderful. Her grandmother was like "a second mom."

Her positive family experiences have made Olivia proud of her Mexican heritage. In addition to rich language and culinary traditions, Mexican culture venerates the large extended family. Olivia appreciated having family around her all the time. She has always had someone to talk to when she couldn't talk to her parents. She knew she could always count on an aunt or a cousin to be good listener or to offer a shoulder to cry upon. Because of her family support system, she has never ever felt unloved.

Every year, her family would visit other branches of the extended family that still lived in Mexico. Through these visits, Olivia could see the contrast between what her family had in California and how her relatives were living. It was a constant reminder how much better off her family was than her relatives in Mexico. These visits made her grateful for her family and the life they had created. Although they were poor, Olivia and her brothers were always clean and well supervised. In addition, their parents always provided them good meals to eat. They were proud people, and they made sure their children reflected that pride. In this pride, Olivia has found the resources to face whatever life may throw her way.

Above all that Olivia's parents taught her, the importance of education is the most deeply ingrained. Consequently, to Olivia, graduating from high school and college was more than just receiving degrees. These events marked defining moments in her life. When she accomplished these goals, Olivia felt she had scaled the wall that separated the world of the child from that of the adult.

But while she felt this change within herself, it took her family a little longer to register that Olivia—their daughter, their sister, their cousin, their niece—was no longer a child. When she actually entered the work force, it was official. They had always cherished her, but only then did the whole family treat Olivia as the adult that *she* knew she had become!

Interviewer: Kathy Perez

Author: April Foster

Ethnic Group: Mexican-American

Generation: Middle