

# It's Never too Late to Graduate: Getting a high school diploma or GED opens doors and possibilities

by Allen Pieleoni

Sharon Lopez has been a loyal volunteer in her community for many years, donating her time to a long list of organizations and causes. "You name it, I've done it," she says.

The Alvord Unified School District has been one of her favorite beneficiaries. "I was offered jobs in the district and told to run for the school board," she says.

But there was one obstacle in the way: She lacked a high school diploma.

**"I want others to know there is hope, that they can do it and will feel better about themselves."**

Sharon Lopez  
Graduate of Alvord Community Adult School

"I was always embarrassed by it; it was a secret I didn't want to talk about," says Lopez, 53. "Even my kids were shocked when I said, 'I got my high school diploma.' Mind you, my son graduated from UC Berkeley.

Lopez is acutely aware that she "missed a lot of opportunities by not having that piece of paper. There were many things I could have done, but I had to let them go because I was unwilling to share my secret."

The chance to change that came in 2020, Lopez recalls. "I just so happened to tell one of my friends about it. She said, 'This is an easy fix; c'mon, let's go.' She took me to the Alvord Community Adult School (ACAS) and signed me up."

The school staff "was so supportive and they truly care about the students," Lopez



Sharon Lopez overcame her fears and got her high school diploma. Photo courtesy of Sharon Lopez.

says. "Because the courses were online, I could work them around my life. Now that I have my diploma, the principal, Craig Shiflett, tells me, 'Now you can go to college, it's never too late.' I might take that avenue and still go to work for the district."

Would she recommend the same path for other middle-aged adults without their diplomas?

"When I started, I thought, 'I haven't been in school in forever, this is impossible,'" she says. "But everyone was so helpful. I want others to know there is hope, that they can do it and will feel better about themselves."

Lopez is not alone. "We've seen a huge increase in students going for their high school diplomas this year," says Victoria Santana, Career Services and Outreach Liaison for ACAS.

It has to do with pandemic-related job loss and workers "stuck in minimum-wage jobs because of a lack of a diploma (or GED)," Santana says.

"Now they're seeing adult education as an opportunity to get a better job or a promotion with that diploma. While it may seem like a piece of paper, it's actually turning into doors opening for them."



For more information on Alvord Unified School District's adult education programs, visit [www.alvordschools.org/adulteducation](http://www.alvordschools.org/adulteducation).

# Pursuing passion: Daughter's hard work in school inspires an East Region Adult Education student

by Kathleen Vivaldi

Most everyone at one point has dreams of what they want as an ideal career. Many leave those dreams right where they started, but some make the decision to prioritize, plan and pursue them. Ninfa M. Rocha is one who took a risk and went for her dream—a career in the medical field.

A single mother who was a business owner, but without a high school education, Rocha wanted to give a better life to her daughter and be a great role model. But her daughter was also a role model for her.

“I would see (my daughter) work hard every single day when she was in high school, all for the ultimate goal of graduation and ultimately college to further her education and career choice,” she says.

Seeing her daughter's motivation inspired her to finish high school and earn her high school diploma through Grossmont Adult Education.

Proving to herself that her dreams are becoming a reality has spurred a lot of confidence. “Once I had completed my GED, I realized I could keep going and that I could accomplish my goals and dreams no matter what stood in my way,” Rocha says. Rocha isn't motivated by how much money she can make—but rather by her passion to help others.

“Because I went back to school and went into adult education, I was able to get certified in a couple of different programs and was able to get a job that had been my dream for many, many years,” she says.

Rocha initially trained to be a medical assistant, and then moved onto the National Caregiver Training Program, Patient Care, Certified Nurse Assistant Program, and certified Phlebotomy Technician One Program—all through



Ninfa M. Rocha, Grossmont graduate. Student at Health Occupations Center

Grossmont Adult Education's Health Occupations Center.

“While I was working to become a Certified Nurse Assistant, I went through Integrated Education Training, which for me meant that while I was in school to become a CNA, I went through training in facilities that trained me on real-life scenarios on what I was learning in school,” she explains.

All of her hard work and passion has led to a career she loves—and one she plans to advance further in. Rocha is currently considering her next step, such as the Licensed Vocational Nursing program, and is working with a Transition Specialist at HOC to see what her options are.

She also shares some advice for others

considering adult education. “Everyone should keep learning and furthering their education no matter what field or specialty,” she says. “I can speak from experience, that going back to school and accomplishing things I never thought possible has made me happier than I could have imagined. Take a chance on yourself and make your dreams a reality!”



To learn more about Grossmont Adult Education, visit <https://adultschool.guhsd.net/> For information on the Health Occupations Center, see <https://hoc.guhsd.net/>.



# ESL Classes: How Huntington Beach Adult School helped a multilingual student advance her career

by Whip Villarreal

**F**rancisca Juarez works as a shift manager at McDonald's and to address her language barrier she was experiencing in both work life and personal life, she turned to Huntington Beach Adult School.

"I benefited from the ESL program because it helped me get a better position at my job and helped me communicate better with people whether they are doctors, police or others that could not understand Spanish," Juarez said. "So taking these classes has helped me better communicate with my community."

Juarez said that attending Huntington Beach Adult School has improved her quality of life by helping her comprehend English. She said that it was difficult not being able to speak English with other managers, supervisors or customers and the language barrier made her job harder than it needed to be. She took advantage of the English as a Second Language program Huntington Beach Adult School offers.

Juarez said that one of her biggest challenges was learning to use a computer. She credits her success to the helpful staff for not only helping her comprehend English, but also teaching her how to properly use a computer. Juarez plans to continue her education with Huntington Beach Adult School so she can make her english more fluent. Meanwhile, she is looking for more opportunities either in her current job or in another line of work. She is interested in pursuing office work and says without receiving education from Huntington Beach Adult School, she may not have those options.

Her advice to others considering taking classes at the school is to not be afraid to attend. The school has a diverse student body made up of people of different age, gender and backgrounds. She said that the school can help improve the quality of life



Francisca Juarez, an ESL graduate, urges other people to attend HBAS, which has improved her quality of life. Photo by Sergio Hernandez

for many in the community who are willing to learn.

Huntington Beach Adult School offers no-to-low-cost programs which include high school diploma/GED programs as well as an array of career training education for in-demand, local, high-paying jobs. In addition to training students in lucrative fields like health care, medical billing, accounting and Information Technology, the school's connections to employers result in more than 95 percent of their graduates finding immediate employment.



To learn more about programs offered at Huntington Beach Adult School visit [www.hbas.edu](http://www.hbas.edu) or call (714) 842-4227.

# A New Language Was Only the Start: Integrated Education Training combines learning English with career technical skills

by Allen Pieleoni

When Luma Dawood left Iraq for a safer life in the United States, she brought along a master's degree in environmental engineering and a four-year degree in civil engineering.

Despite those towering credentials, she spoke practically no English (as she says, “Yes,” “no” and sometimes “hi”) and was coming cold to a foreign culture where she “felt like an alien,” recalls Dawood, 47. “I’d left everything behind. I felt shy and lonely and had no friends.”

offered something, I took it to encourage myself.”

Along her CNAS journey – with many certificates in multiple fields – Dawood learned that adult education does much more than prepare students for the workplace, she says. “It’s where we learn the systems of life in the U.S. Now I have lots of friends from school. We go out together and I love it. I’m not shy to talk to anyone.”

“I am so grateful for this school; it’s like my family,” she says. “They helped me become a better mom because now my kids listen to me because I can speak English.”

Dawood experienced first-hand CNAS’ innovative Integrated Education Training program for three career pathways – Early Childhood Development, Business Office Technology and Trade Skills.

In addition to specialized classes for each pathway, the program involves accelerated English-language classes focusing on the vocabulary and technical terminology specific to a particular pathway. In other words, the language has context.

For instance, the Business Office Technology instructor collaborates closely with the English teacher to help incorporate the specialized vocabulary and terminology the graduate will find in the workplace for that particular pathway. It’s a contextualized “shortcut” for the English-learning student.

“The program’s ultimate goal is to get our students into the workforce faster and with more confidence, which benefits our community,” says CNAS principal Dr. Thoibi Rublaitus.



Luma Dawood went to Corona-Norco Adult School to learn English, but found so much more. Photo courtesy of Luma Dawood.

**“The program’s ultimate goal is to get our students into the workforce faster and with more confidence, which benefits our community.”**

**Dr. Thoibi Rublaitus**  
Principal of Corona-Norco Adult School

Dawood enrolled her children in school, where they soon learned to speak English, “leaving a language gap between them and me,” she says. “I wanted to close that gap and decided I should do something for myself as a mom.”

She learned about Corona-Norco Adult School (CNAS) and enrolled in its English as a Second Language program. “The people in my classes all had different backgrounds and spoke different languages, but we were all in it together,” she says.

Soon, Dawood discovered the school’s menu of Career Technical Education classes for English language-learners and began signing up. “I love to study and learn,” she explains. “Whenever they



For more information on Alvord Unified School District’s adult education programs, visit [www.alvordschools.org/adulteducation](http://www.alvordschools.org/adulteducation).

# The right message in the right way: How Huntington Beach Adult School partners with local employers to provide skilled employees

by Raul Clement

**W**hen Luisa Rivera decided to take English classes in 2012, she never imagined that she would find herself back in the same classroom 11 years later—let alone that this time she'd be in front of the class, giving a speech.

Rivera had already been in the U.S. for years when she finally signed up for the ESL program at Huntington Beach Adult School. She was a fluent English speaker, but she still felt she had more to learn. Her position in Human Resources for the Hyatt Regency Orange County requires polished written communication.

“A lot of times, my punctuation and tenses were wrong,” Rivera explains. “Working in Human Resources, which is the face of the hotel, I wanted to make sure I was sending the right messages in the right way. The ESL program helped me tremendously with that.”

Hiring for a place like Hyatt Regency can be difficult. The hotel is a 24/7 operation, so employees need to have flexible availability. Furthermore, the hotel likes to promote from within, so Rivera is always looking for people who she believes will stay the course. It's a path she herself followed.

“I was a cashier, then did accounting, and now human resources. I worked myself up in the company. I didn't start in human resources,” she says. “Our company has a lot to offer to people who stick around.”

So when Rivera was looking to find good candidates, she naturally thought of Huntington Beach Adult School. She'd been through the program and knew what it could do. She asked them if she could send over job listings. This led to them inviting her to a job fair last April, and again this year. And in February of this year, she was invited to speak in front of a class as part of HBAS's “Job Readiness” series.



Luisa Rivera, in her position in human resources at the Hyatt Regency Orange County, works closely with Huntington Beach Adult School to fill positions at the hotel. Photo by Sergio Hernandez

Her topic: Employer Expectations. She talked about eye contact and smiling, but most of all the importance of being honest. When candidates come across as honest in interviews, she feels she can trust them to show up on time, be communicative and fulfill the responsibilities of the job.

Ironically, although she lectured on expectations, she herself didn't expect that she would be standing in the same classroom where she'd taken ESL classes years ago. It actually became a talking point in her lecture, a way of emphasizing to the current ESL students the value of the skills HBAS teaches.

These skills extend beyond merely learning a new language. HBAS offers more professional skill development and life-skill training every year. Even Rivera, who attended the program, is impressed by the way it has pivoted and expanded to accommodate the needs of students.

“I know that since I've left it's gotten even better,” she says. “They are more hands-on now. They're helping students with things like opening checking accounts and responding to business emails. I'm

proud of the school for changing up their teaching methods to improve the experience. I think it's wonderful. I really do.”



To learn more about programs offered at Huntington Beach Adult School visit [www.hbas.edu](http://www.hbas.edu) or call (714) 842-4227.



# 'It Was the Best Decision I Could Have Made': Adult School helps student launch medical career

by Anne Stokes

**A**licia Torres-Wynne graduated high school at 40. Since then, she's been making up for lost time. In the span of five years, she earned her diploma, completed both medical assisting and phlebotomy programs and is in the final stages of becoming a licensed vocational nurse (LVN).

Torres-Wynne left high school her senior year and went on to work a total of 23 years in customer service and accounting jobs – something that paid the bills but wasn't fulfilling. In 2015, she decided it was time to change and went back to school to earn her high school diploma at the Jurupa Adult School.

**"If you're going to do something for the rest of your life, why not do something you're passionate about?"**

**Alicia Torres-Wynne  
Graduate of Jurupa Adult School**

"I had been considering job-growth opportunities which required further education, and not having my high school diploma was always in the back of my mind. Honestly it haunted me for years," she says. "It was the best decision I could have made."

While Torres-Wynne could have advanced her existing career, she opted instead to change it entirely and enrolled in Jurupa's medical assisting program.

"If you're going to do something for the rest of your life, why not do something you're passionate about?" she says.

After she completed the program, she was offered a position at the same hospital she served her externship. According to Dr. Annamarie Montañez, principal of Jurupa Adult School, health care workers are always in demand.

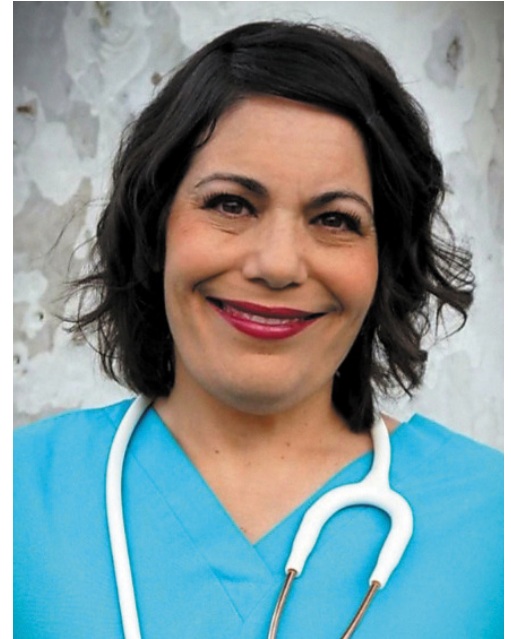
"Prior to the pandemic, we saw with the programs that we have, probably a 15 to 20% increase (in demand). ... We know health care is usually ever-growing," she says. "I would say nine times out of 10, our students do really well and they get hired at their externship site."

For many students, one of the biggest obstacles to entering the medical field is cost. According to Montañez, similar medical assisting programs at private colleges can cost upwards of \$20,000. At Jurupa Adult School, the entire program costs students \$250.

"With that, we include uniforms, we include CPR certifications, we include books, their blood pressure cuff – everything that they're going to need to go out and work," she says. "When I got here to this district and I spoke with the superintendent (Elliott Duchon), he wanted to make it all very accessible to the community."

Even after graduating, Torres-Wynne says her former teachers are still a source of support.

"When I had my self doubts and insecurities, they were always there and very encouraging," she says. "They share your successes with you and they're happy to see that you went further than you initially decided to."



Alicia Torres-Wynne earned her high school diploma and built a foundation for her medical career at Jurupa Adult School. Photo courtesy of Alicia Torres-Wynne.



For more information on Alvord Unified School District's adult education programs, visit [www.alvordschools.org/adulteducation](http://www.alvordschools.org/adulteducation).