

Fall 2019

Family First

Linfield Magazine Staff

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Recommended Citation

Linfield Magazine Staff (2019) "Family First," *Linfield Magazine*: Vol. 16 : No. 1 , Article 5.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/linfield_magazine/vol16/iss1/5

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Family first

“College graduates,” she said, taking her husband’s hand. “We have college graduates.”

by Tom Hallman Jr.

The voice that changes a life can come from anywhere: A distant relative, a high school counselor, a lifelong friend. Or, maybe, from a coach you only met that day.

At Linfield this fall, 28 percent of all students and 42 percent of the incoming class at the McMinnville campus are “first gen,” a term describing students whose parents are not college graduates.

Terrence Lewis '23 is one of them.

A standout high school athlete, Lewis had dreamed of playing professional football. Going into his senior year at Scappoose High School, he realized that was probably unrealistic. So, too, was the idea of going to college because he lacked, in any area of his life, role models.

“My father left my mom before I was born,” he said. “When I was 2 years old, my mom died in an accident. My grandparents adopted me and I called them ‘mom’ and ‘dad.’ My grandma had dropped out of high school and my grandpa had a high school degree.”

When Lewis was 7, on Christmas Day, his grandfather died.



Terrence Lewis '23

“My grandmother would be so proud. Going to college was something I never thought would happen to me.” – Terrence Lewis '23

“Not all students are ready to embrace their identity. Some don’t tell their peers. At Linfield, we’re working to create an environment where first-gen students don’t feel isolated.”

– Gerardo Ochoa, director of community relations and special assistant to the president

“My grandmother raised me,” he said. Then, “she developed cancer and died when I was 14. I was left with no one to raise me through high school.”

His 25-year-old sister, with only a high school diploma herself, moved back to Scappoose to care for her brother. Lewis, a good student, had no sense of direction until the day a Linfield recruiter showed up and offered him a spot on the football team.

The voice that changes a life.

“He made me think about life after high school,” Lewis said. “I remembered how my grandma had always wanted me to go to college.”

Lewis learned the Linfield football team had a winning history, and the college was home to an outstanding nursing program. Lewis is now on the team, an offensive tackle wearing No. 60, taking pre-nursing courses and excited for what will happen on the field and in the classroom.

“My grandmother would be so proud,” he said. “Going to college was something I never thought would happen to me.”

To appreciate the heart of this story, you need context.

Bored and unmotivated, I graduated high school near the bottom of my senior class. But my parents, both college graduates, had talked all my life about why higher education mattered. So, I applied to a couple of colleges. Reality hit when I got back the rejection letters. Sitting at the kitchen table, I told my parents it was too late to get serious and college was out of the question. My parents revealed their own educational struggles and explained what they’d learned about themselves in college. They were convinced there was a college for me, and they’d help find it.

Together, we navigated the admission and financial aid

process. I was eventually admitted to Drake University, a small private school in Des Moines, Iowa. My parents told me to meet with my advisor to build a relationship, and gave me advice about what college was going to be like.

Four years later, in 1977, I graduated with a bachelor’s degree in journalism.

I worked for a magazine in New York City and then returned to Oregon. I’m a senior reporter now at *The Oregonian*. There for nearly 40 years, I’ve won every writing prize in the business, including the Pulitzer Prize. I’ve written for national magazines, lectured at storytelling conferences and authored four books.

What would have happened to me had my parents not been college graduates and been able to help me find a path to college where I, in a sense, reinvented myself? Clearly, I would have led a much different life. More importantly, I would have been unable to guide and encourage my two daughters, both of whom have college degrees.

First-gen students are not statistics, not part of a trendy talking point at institutions across the country. They are, in every sense of the word, pioneers, navigating a world foreign to their immediate families.

It’s not easy.

Linfield administrators are aware of all this. First-gen students are assigned to mentoring groups composed of three other students, a faculty member, a staff member, a current student and an alumnus. The goal is to create significant relationships with people who know Linfield and the reality of being a college student.

With guidance, said Gerardo Ochoa, Linfield’s director of community relations and special assistant to the president, “instead of investing time learning the hidden rules of



Brian Gustafson '00

college, which can be a mystery, a first-gen student can focus on academics.

“These students need to feel empowered.”

First-gen students come from cities and small towns. Some have parents who immigrated. Some have families who have lived in poverty. Others have parents who own a business, but know nothing of college. What all first-gen students have in common is not having the ethos of what it means to be a college student. Ochoa, who has worked at Linfield for 15 years, said while many are proud to be first-gen students, some carry a sense of shame about their backgrounds.

“Not all students are ready to embrace their identity,” said Ochoa. “Some don’t tell their peers. At Linfield, we’re working to create an environment where first-gen students don’t feel isolated.”

The first year, he said, sets the tone. First-gen students who make it through the initial year stay in school and graduate at rates comparable to all students.

“First-gen students bring incredible assets,” said Ochoa. “Grit and overcoming obstacles are life skills that will help them thrive long after they graduate. They have the opportu-

nity to change the trajectory of their family’s history. It happened to me.”

Ochoa was born in Mexico to parents with elementary-school educations. His father, who left school in the sixth grade to help support his family, so valued education that he later returned, at age 18, to that same sixth-grade classroom because there was no night school for adults.

“For a year, my father was in a class with 11-year-olds,” said Ochoa. “His friends ridiculed him, but he stuck with it.”

Ochoa’s parents ultimately immigrated to Hood River, and their son was the first to not only graduate high school and college, but also earn a master’s degree.

“Whenever classes were tough for me, I thought of my father,” he said. “If he could persevere, what was my excuse?”

Ochoa’s wife is also a first-gen college graduate.

“With our daughter, it was not if she goes to college but where,” Ochoa said. “She heard that message all her life.”

She listened. She, too, now has a college degree and is preparing for graduate school.

Brian Gustafson '00 grew up in Clatskanie, a small Oregon town. His parents had high school diplomas. His mother did not work. His father was a shift worker at the paper mill. Their son was a good student, and his parents encouraged him to go to college so he wouldn’t have to work with his hands. But they had no idea what that entailed.

“They knew nothing about the application process. I started the process with a bit of ignorance. First-gen students don’t think about taking classes to prepare for the SAT, or getting help with the college essay. Honestly, I didn’t even know what to look for in a school.”

The voice he heard was from a high school friend who happened to be going to Linfield. That was good enough for Gustafson. He applied, was accepted and the two young men became college roommates.

“His parents were college graduates and knew the ropes,” Gustafson said. “I relied on them.”

Gustafson, now 41, said Linfield did not have designated programs for first-gen students at the time, and he had no idea others were dealing with the same issues he was. Colloquium, a program for all freshmen, helped. Fifteen first-year students were assigned to a group with a professor and an upperclass-

“They lived a life we dreamed of for them. As a man working in the fields, I never believed such a thing could be possible.” – Honorio Manuel-Perez

man, who both led discussions on how to study efficiently, manage time and build relationships with faculty members.

“Those,” Gustafson said, “are the things that can overwhelm a first-gen student.”

His parents were proud when he graduated from Linfield. But they couldn’t understand why he then wanted to go to law school. Gustafson had to explain that the goal was not simply a job, but a career that mattered. He is now an attorney specializing in patent law. He works in San Francisco, where he lives with his wife and their 4-year-old son.

“It was a fluke I went to Linfield,” said Gustafson. “If I hadn’t, I would have ended up on a very different path both academically and career-wise.”

Gustafson has never forgotten his roots. He speaks to high school seniors in the Bay Area. He tells them how going to Linfield changed his life and emphasizes that there is a place in college for first-gen students.

“Telling my story,” he said, “is part of my obligation to help young people who remind me of myself.”

If first-gen students have dreams, so, too, do their parents. Honorio Manuel-Perez and his wife, Yolanda Martinez de Manuel, live in Woodburn. Their daughters graduated from Linfield, Cinthia in 2005 and Yessica in 2007, and later earned advanced degrees. The couple doesn’t speak English, and Linfield administrators put me in touch with an interpreter to help with an interview.

“I am a first-gen student,” the interpreter, Isabel Sanchez-Huerta, told me, adding she went on to earn a bachelor’s and master’s degree. “My parents were migrant workers. There’s a perception that the parents of first-gen students don’t care. They value education, but don’t know how to navigate the system.”

Sanchez-Huerta and I met the parents of the Linfield graduates in their home, talking at the dining room table.

Manuel-Perez was born in a small town in Mexico. His father died before he was born, and his mother and grandparents raised him. He left school after the sixth grade, worked the fields and then made his way to Mexico City to work in a factory. In Mexico City, he met Martinez de Manuel. Her parents had separated when she was 6, and her mother did not know how to read or write.

“Even before we married, my husband and I talked about how we wanted our children to have better educational opportunities than we had,” she said.

After they married, her husband temporarily left the family in Mexico and came to the United States in 1988 to work the fields, sending money home and returning when the season ended. In 1996, the couple immigrated to Woodburn, where they knew other families who had roots in Mexico. Their daughters were born in Mexico City, and the parents worked in the fields and at the cannery until Manuel-Perez was hired at the Coca-Cola plant in Wilsonville.

The couple knew they wanted their daughters to go to college.

“But it was very confusing,” he said. “We had no idea what to do. How would this work? High school teachers helped our daughters look for good schools and showed them how to apply. Linfield had a good financial package, and programs to support our daughters.”

While at Linfield, their daughters had the opportunity to study abroad in Spain, Germany and Mexico.

“They lived a life we dreamed of for them,” their father said. “As a man working in the fields, I never believed such a thing could be possible.”

Cinthia lives in Woodburn still and Yessica in Portland. Like Gustafson, they are committed to helping future generations. They speak at the high school, spending extra time with those who would be first-gen college students.



Honorio Manuel-Perez and Yolanda Martinez de Manuel, center, dreamed their daughters Yessica '07, left, and Cinthia '05, would go to college, but didn't know how to navigate the system.

Several first-gen students they mentored have enrolled at Linfield and earned degrees. A few years ago, their maternal grandmother was admitted to the hospital for what would be the final time. There, she talked constantly to doctors, nurses and anyone who would listen. Not about her life and health, but her granddaughters who were college graduates.

“She had such pride,” said Martinez de Manuel. “This

overwhelming joy, from a woman who could not read or write, at the end of her life.”

The memory made Martinez de Manuel cry. She wiped her eye. Her husband gently reached over to pat her shoulder and comfort her.

“College graduates,” she said, taking her husband’s hand. “We have college graduates.”

About Tom Hallman Jr.

Tom Hallman Jr. is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and author. He’s been on staff at *The Oregonian* for nearly 40 years and has published four books. His journalism and nonfiction narrative stories explore the significance of big moments and small and their impact on a life.

