She arrived in the United States at age 15, married, pregnant and full of hope.

“We moved because I wanted my baby to have a better future,” Alma Lievanos said. “I knew if I stayed in Mexico, I wouldn’t be able to give him the education or the life he deserves.”

Her son is now a 20-year-old college student.

Although she moved for educational opportunities for her family, it wasn’t until five years ago that she benefited from those opportunities herself at Black Hawk College.

Starting at Black Hawk College

When Lievanos’ oldest was exploring college possibilities in 2015, she began researching colleges to help him and she received encouragement to seek an education of her own.

Initially, she didn’t think attending school was possible or the right fit for her after spending so many years focused on raising her children and working, but then she discovered BHC’s Adult Education offerings.

Soon, she was pursuing her GED®. Three months later, she earned it. Lievanos then took developmental classes at Black Hawk College to make her eligible and prepared for college-level courses.

After that, she began earning her Associate in Arts degree.

“I chose Black Hawk College because it was the only college that provided the resources I needed to pursue an education,” Lievanos said. “I’m a nontraditional student, and Black

Hawk College gave me the opportunity to change my life."

Studying at Black Hawk College

The Association of Latin American Students (ALAS) was one of the favorite parts about her time at Black Hawk College. Highlights included serving as ALAS president and attending United States Hispanic Leadership Institute conferences in Chicago.

Lievanos said hearing Richard Montañez speak at one of the conferences stuck with her. The motivational speaker invented Flamin' Hot Cheetos while working as a custodian at Frito Lay and rose to an executive role.

In addition to being Latino, Lievanos and Montañez also had job experiences in common. At the time of the conference, Lievanos was a custodian at Augustana College. In February 2019, she was promoted to custodial supervisor.

"He's a custodian and made it all the way there. I can do the same thing," she remembers thinking while listening to Montañez's story.

Lievanos also gained a mentor through the club. ALAS advisor Gabriella Hurtado, BHC recruiting manager, quickly became a source of support for Lievanos.

"She not only helped me to navigate everything at school, but she was always there if I needed her," she said. "There were some times when it was getting hard for me to do homework and come to school and everything. She was always there to help me out, cheer me up, push me or just to show me the way."

In December 2019, Lievanos completed her last Associate in Arts class. She's looking forward to walking across the stage during the commencement ceremony in May 2020 to celebrate her years of hard work.

"I never thought I'd be able to change my life this way," she said.

To make attending college possible, she took online classes and on-campus classes that started in the afternoon after work. The mother of three now has two children in college, with her youngest in high school.

Cooking while working on homework was a normal routine. Lievanos balancing work, family and college has served as an inspiration for her son. While dealing with his own challenges he has said, "If you can do it, I can do it."

Looking ahead

Lievanos plans to continue her college journey in Fall 2020 by pursuing a bachelor's degree in sociology at Augustana College.

After graduation, she wants a sociology-related job where she can serve the community. She plans to work in social work or student affairs.

Lievanos' advice for prospective BHC students is that whether you are a high school senior or a nontraditional student, Black Hawk College has a lot to offer.

Thanks to the wide range of programs available at Black Hawk College, Lievanos is now on a path she didn't initially think was possible for herself.

"No matter what your goals are in education, Black Hawk College can help you to achieve it," she said. "BHC advisors can help you to create the perfect path."

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