

Choosing Her Course to College

As Betsy Perez of Highland Park realizes her dream of going away to school, her father wakes up to the reality of just how far away.

By Erika Hayasaki, Times Staff Writer

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Ever since she was a little girl, Betsy Perez had known she wanted to go to college some place far away. Some place different from Highland Park, where she lived. In second grade, she wrote in a journal that one day she would attend Harvard.



Always, Betsy's father dismissed his daughter's grand plans with a soft smile. Sergio Perez, a truck driver, knew his children would have great opportunities. That was why he left Guatemala for the United States. He knew that one day she would become far more successful than he was. He knew that Betsy, a Franklin High School student, would attend a university. And it would be close to him.

In a blink, his daughter turned 18. A young woman now, with her father's personality. Smart and stubborn. Betsy called herself a feminist. She wanted to become a political reporter. She drew a picture of Rosie the Riveter and hung it on her bedroom wall, and she still talked of going to a university far away.

Sometimes when Perez got mad at Betsy, he would say, "Ahhh. Go off to your college."

Never did he believe she would.

Ten days. Five East Coast states. Fifteen colleges.

One morning last March, Betsy boarded a plane with 30 other students from Los Angeles public high schools. It was her first time traveling to the East Coast. She got off the plane in Boston and stepped into a flurry of snow.

The college tour was coordinated by a nonprofit group called College Match, run by a good-hearted man named Harley Frankel. The itinerary included Wellesley, Brandeis, Mount Holyoke, Trinity, Yale and Harvard.

Frankel is the former national director of Head Start. He also served as a senior White House aide during the Carter administration and as senior executive for the Children's Defense Fund. Today he raises money to take low-income Los Angeles public school students on nationwide college tours. He helps them with college essays and applications and raises money for their SAT prep classes. He gives them laptop computers provided by sponsors.

Frankel's son graduated from Harvard-Westlake, a private school in North Hollywood. He attended Williams College in Massachusetts and later transferred to Pomona College. Even with good counselors and teachers, his son's experience applying to colleges was daunting. Frankel wondered how students from overcrowded schools, whose parents had not attended college, figured it out.

He recruited his first College Match class — 40 students — in 2003. Word spread. Next year, his program will serve 110. To be eligible, students must have good grades and be college-bound. They must also agree to consider schools outside California.

Not long ago, College Match helped a Franklin High student get into Wellesley. But her parents had mistakenly overvalued their property in East Los Angeles on financial aid forms. As a result, Wellesley did not offer the girl money. Frankel spent a month straightening it out with Wellesley officials. But in the end, it did not matter. The girl's parents wanted her to stay close to home. So she chose UCLA instead.

It was all rather embarrassing for Frankel.

"I don't mind if a kid goes to a good West Coast school," Frankel said. "I don't have an East Coast bias. But when a kid turns down Wellesley, the kid is losing out."

On the East Coast tour, Betsy fell in love with the snow. She wondered, how could her father not understand her excitement? He was the one who taught her how much fun it was to travel outside of Los Angeles. In his blue 1979 Datsun truck, he took her to places like Oxnard, Big Bear, even Guatemala. Those road trips became Betsy's favorite childhood memories.

She applied to 15 colleges and was accepted to all but five. Her father supported her going to college. Maybe she could attend USC.

But Betsy was not accepted there. What about Pitzer College in Claremont? her father asked. It is only 35 minutes away.

Betsy had other plans.

"In Latino culture, the women aren't really supposed to go far away," Betsy said. "I have been the black sheep on the women's side of the family. I just don't accept that whole mentality. I don't."

Months earlier, while on the college tour, Betsy told Frankel she had already made up her mind. She wanted to go to Trinity College in Connecticut. It was small and friendly. Perfect.

When the Trinity acceptance letter arrived, Betsy e-mailed Frankel. The school was offering Betsy the best financial aid package.

"What do I do?" she asked Frankel. "My parents want me to go to Pitzer. How do I tell them I'm going to go to Trinity?"

"You're a big girl now," Frankel recalled telling her. "Tell them you love them. Tell them you will always have their values."

That night, Betsy called her father, mother and older brother into her bedroom, decorated with 41 Barbie dolls, a string of Christmas lights and a Nefertiti statue.

"I want to go to Trinity," she told them.

Her father sighed. "Even if we argue with you, you're not going to change your mind," he said in Spanish. "So what's the point of us saying anything?"

The next day Betsy e-mailed Frankel again: "I did it."

A few weeks later, Betsy gave Frankel a thank-you gift at a College Match banquet at Dodger Stadium. It was a silver tie clip in the shape of a quetzal bird. She had learned about the significance of the bird with its brilliant red belly when she visited Maya ruins as a child on one of her father's road trips. She told Frankel it was a symbol of wealth and freedom.

"It is never to be kept caged," Betsy said when she presented it to Frankel, "because of its beauty and its will to be free."

On a Saturday morning in June, the graduating College Match students and their parents gathered in a Bell High School library for their last group session. A donor distributed sheets and comforters for their dorm rooms.

Frankel told the students he had arranged for them to take writing courses over the summer and to receive meningitis shots, recommended for students who live in dormitories. He was also finding campus mentors for each of them. Some had chosen University of California campuses or Pomona College, while others were going to Harvard, Yale and Carnegie Mellon.

"Sixteen of you will be on the East Coast," he said. "I want you to be in touch with each other."

Julie Neilson, head counselor for the program, told the students, "This will be a time of a lot of firsts. First time away from home. First time making your own decisions. It's normal to feel uncomfortable."

When it comes to parents, she said, "Give them a regular time of day in the week to check in. Don't make them think they can call you any time they feel like it."

She told a story of one student who almost left college because her mother kept calling, crying. "I told her to get a new phone number," Neilson said. "Your parents are adults. Treat them as so."

Betsy turned to look at her father, who was sitting in the back of the room. The two of them had arrived late. He had his earphones on. He was listening to the World Cup soccer game, Mexico and Argentina, on his portable radio.

Betsy turned back to the counselor, who had changed the subject to parties, alcohol, relationships, credit cards and date rape.

"Some of the things you've heard are kind of scary," said Tony Reveles, Bell High's college counselor, who also works closely with the program. "I'm sure some parents are sitting here thinking, 'Oh my God, what am I doing?'"

Betsy glanced back at her father again. He was still listening to the game.

It was not that he did not worry. He dreaded the day they would say goodbye. It was easier not to focus on details or plans or anything else about that day.

On the other hand, Betsy's mother, Rosa, cried every time someone talked about that day. She cried when Betsy said goodbye to her favorite teacher. She cried when she looked at old family photographs. She worried her daughter might fall in love and never come back.

"I don't have words for that day," her mother said. "We will try to be strong."

A few years ago, Betsy's brother, Jonathan, 21, considered going to the University of Michigan, which had accepted him. Their parents objected to his going so far away. He decided to enroll at Cal Poly Pomona instead.

Betsy will be the first woman in the family to attend college. Her parents, both legal immigrants, are very proud. It is just so hard to let go.

"She wants to go very far," her father said one afternoon. He never finished high school. Recently, the 44-year-old has been disabled by a back injury. "If I want to drive there, it's five days. It's more difficult for me. And more expensive too."

"But, ahh," he slapped his knee. "I just pray God takes care of her and nothing bad will happen. I want her to return with a degree and be able to do something in the world."

Betsy said, "So that I'll be able to tell him it was worth something — it was all worth it."

Already, August had arrived. Four big suitcases were stuffed with sweaters, belts, towels, two coats and Betsy's Rosie the Riveter drawing. She was scheduled to check in to Trinity in just five days.

She did not yet know how she was going to get there.

Her father said he would drive her to the school, in Hartford, Conn. It would be cheaper than flying. Then he changed his mind. Gas prices were too high, he said, and he was not feeling up to it.

Now Betsy was frantically searching for airline tickets. Prices had jumped and she worried whether her parents could afford it.

"My biggest fear is that I won't get there on time," she said.

"This," her father said with a sigh, "is why I said stay here."

Four days left. Still no plane ticket. Her father did not want to buy online. He did not trust the Internet with his credit card number.

Friday came. It was two days before Betsy was supposed to arrive at Trinity. Before dusk, her father drove to Los Angeles International Airport. He went to the Delta Airlines ticket counter. He paid \$1,120 for Betsy's one-way ticket and a round-trip ticket for her brother to accompany her for two days and return in time for the new semester at Cal Poly.

That evening, Betsy climbed into bed with her parents. The three of them watched a video of her *quinceañera*.

The next day, her father seemed stressed. He was serious and did not smile. His daughter's flight was leaving tomorrow at 9:55 p.m.

"I'm not sure we did the right thing," he said to his wife.

He did not sleep that night. He tossed and worried. He thought this must have been how his mother felt when he left Guatemala at 19 for the United States. He prayed: "Take care of my daughter."

When he was sure no one else was awake, he cried.

At the Delta ticket counter, Betsy's father was panicking. One of her suitcases weighed too much, and he would have to pay \$25 to send it through. Take out some clothes and put them in one of the other suitcases, he told Betsy. She calmly took out some sweaters and a towel and handed them to her mother to take home instead.

Her father shouted at Betsy to put them in another suitcase. Betsy said no.

"Mira!" he yelled to his wife. Look! She should just put them in another suitcase. His voice fell. "She might need those."

Betsy's mother shook her head. "She has others."

Already, her mother was crying. She had started on the ride to the airport. Betsy held her mother's hand and cried too.

"We know it's her future. It's a big opportunity for us and for her," her mother said. "But you know, your mind knows that. But your heart does not accept it."

In line for the security checkpoint, a guard yelled: "Take your ID out, along with your boarding pass. It will speed up the process!"

The long line of travelers moved fast. It was time for Betsy and her brother. Her mother traced the sign of the cross on Betsy's body and said goodbye. Her father kissed her forehead. He hugged Betsy, then let go.

Betsy waved to her parents as she rode the escalator up. She reached the top. She turned away and buried her face into her brother's chest.

Her mother buried her face into her husband's chest.

Betsy's father stared helplessly at the escalator for several minutes, even though his daughter was already gone.

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Photo:

Betsy Perez, 18 at her home in Highland Park Tuesday, will be heading to Connecticut to attend college at her father's (Sergio Perez, background) dismay
(Carlos Chavez / LAT)