



Ready to Roll

The newest freshman class is about to make the big leap into life at UCI. It's a diverse group. Itzel Guerrero shares how she got there.

By Sherri Cruz
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UC Irvine freshman Itzel Guerrero was a shy 9-year-old when she auditioned for The Wooden Floor dance program.

She didn't have any dance training. But she didn't need it.

Itzel Guerrero will begin attending The Henry Samueli School of Engineering at UC Irvine this fall to study civil engineering.

"It wasn't about technique or how good you could dance," Itzel said. She needed only passion and commitment. Those were things that she had.

The after-school dance program in Santa Ana teaches kids age 8-18 life skills through dance and performance.

The Wooden Floor also expects all of its students to go to college and provides tutoring, college prep and scholarships to that end.

Itzel's experience at The Wooden Floor led her to Sage Hill School, a rigorous private high school in Newport Coast, which then opened the door to UCI, where she's now a freshman studying civil engineering.

Founded three decades ago as St. Joseph's Ballet by former Catholic nun Beth Burns, The Wooden Floor has a stellar record of ushering kids to college. Since 2004, all 136 of The Wooden Floor's graduating high school seniors have enrolled in college.

"They are becoming change agents in their families, neighborhoods and communities," said Dawn Reese, executive director at The Wooden Floor. That includes Itzel.

"She's really special. She's focused and hardworking," Reese said.

Itzel has had a lot of support and encouragement from her parents. She also is disciplined and has worked hard in school.

"My mom was the one who encouraged me to go to The Wooden Floor. She's always been there to motivate me to try new things," she said.

Itzel is petite, with long dark hair past her waist. Her energy is as high as her hair is long.

She was even named to succeed. Itzel is a Mayan name that means "star of the aurora sky," she said. "My mom tells me all the time."

At first, she didn't want to go to Sage Hill, but her mother encouraged her. "She knew it was such a good opportunity, and she didn't want me to miss out on that," Itzel said. "She said I'd love it. She was right."

Her other big passion is music. Through her church, she sings at weddings and funerals. She also sings at quinceañera celebrations. She plays piano, and she learned to play guitar by watching YouTube videos.

In high school, she excelled in math. "I knew I wanted to have a career that involved math because that's what I've always enjoyed," she said.

"I like the feeling you get when you find the answer. It's like solving a puzzle," she added.

As she looks forward to the school year, she's excited. "I feel really prepared," she said.

She's taking a smaller course load to start. "I'd rather do a little and do really well than take a lot and fail."

She hopes to join a sorority, too. Her sister, Elideth, suggested it might be a good way for her to meet new friends.

Right now, Itzel wants to be a civil engineer, but if her passions change, she's open to other possibilities. Her current career choice was inspired by a trip to Costa Rica during her sophomore year in high school.

"We stayed in a village that was really poor. The houses were unstable. The roads weren't safe. I saw the way they were living in an unsafe environment. It made me think about how I could help them," she said.

She wants to work abroad at some point in her life.

But she's a California girl. More specifically, she's an Orange County girl. "I know I'll always come back here," she said.

"I love Orange County. I wouldn't want to go to college anywhere else."

Her mother is happy she's going to school locally. Itzel will live with her family in Orange and commute. "It's the greatest thing that could've happened for my mom," she said. "She always wanted me to go to UCI."

Even her brother, Andres, who is 16, is secretly happy that she's sticking around, Itzel said.

On a recent visit to the campus, she wandered around and marveled at the campus.

"It's so big," she said. "It's beautiful. I'm so excited."