**Karen Picker**

Listening to Karen Picker talk about her life, it is impossible not to feel inspired by her enthusiasm and her work ethic. And don’t let her youth deceive you. This is one determined young lady who has learned how to balance the various aspects of her life by setting goals and maintaining her priorities.

Although Karen is a native of Valencia, Venezuela, her family background is somewhat international. Her father’s side of the family (the quiet, stoic side) lives in Chile but has German roots while her mother’s family (the crazy side) is from Venezuela. As a youngster, Karen was very active and loved swimming, biking, and traveling. After graduating from high school in Venezuela, Karen arrived in Cypress, Texas in January 2009. Just looking for something to occupy her time while on vacation, Karen started taking ESOL classes at Lone Star College-CyFair. However, she wasn’t a very serious student at first. All of that changed when she decided to stay in the United States and get her education. Despite her youth she realized, “I need English. This is the time to learn.” Once her attitude changed, she became a responsible, dedicated student with aspirations of earning a degree in mechanical engineering in the United States. Karen plans to earn her associate’s degree from Lone Star College-CyFair in the fall of 2011 before transferring to a university to complete her bachelor’s degree in engineering.

Although Karen makes being successful seem almost easy, that’s not the whole story. Adjusting to her new life in Texas involved overcoming two distinct challenges, learning English and learning how to live independently. In the beginning, English was difficult. Karen had attended public schools in Venezuela that did not have strong English programs. Therefore, she started out as a beginning level ESOL student with very limited knowledge of the English language. She recalls her first ESOL professor, Department Chair Macarena Aguilar, with great fondness, remembering the support she received from Dr. Aguilar. The respect is mutual. Dr. Aguilar commented, “Karen is one of those students that you see flourish in front of your very eyes, and it has been a pleasure witnessing her tremendous development.” Not only is Karen a fast learner, but she also has a “contagious smile and she was always helpful with other students. You feel warm when you are around her.” ESOL instructors Carolyn Ho and Mary Ann Freeman also made an impact on Karen and vice-versa. Dr. Ho stated, “Karen impresses me most with her natural curiosity and precocious maturity about life and learning. In my class she was not afraid of asking questions and always came prepared. It was a pleasure having her in my class.” Adjunct Professor Mary Ann Freeman echoed these sentiments, “By the end of the semester she was confidently writing sophisticated essays that I still remember. Plus, she was just a joy to have in class. I am so proud of her!”

The second challenge that Karen faced was living on her own at such a young age. At 18, Karen found herself alone, living in a new country and trying to learn a new language while at the same time learning how to maintain a household on her own. While other teenagers were going to parties and having fun, Karen was learning how to cook, clean, and pay the bills, responsibilities that her parents had always taken care of in Venezuela. This experience made Karen realize that she had to grow up quickly. She understood that her parents had made sacrifices that would allow her to live in the United States, and she intends to pay them back with hard work and good grades. Her recent induction into the Beta Lambda Mu chapter of the international honor society, Phi Theta Kappa, is a testament to the gratitude she feels towards her parents.

In addition to the encouragement that Karen has received from her parents and professors, she also credits Lone Star College-CyFair for providing a supportive environment that has allowed her to thrive. From the custodians to the president, Karen is amazed by the lengths Lone Star College employees will go to in order to offer assistance to students. She feels that she would not have the same opportunities if she were still in her home country, and she truly appreciates the education she is receiving here. Regarding the Lone Star College-CyFair ESOL program, Karen encourages ESOL students to complete the entire ESOL program and not skip the last level. Sometimes ESOL students grow impatient and skip one or two courses at the end of the program because they are anxious to begin studying in their specific fields. However, Karen firmly believes that her current academic success is due to the fact that she patiently completed the entire ESOL program and learned as much as she could about the English language before enrolling in a degree program. Speaking from experience, she says that once you enroll in English 1301, students are expected to know how to write an academic paper and will no longer receive grammar lessons. A strong foundation in reading and writing is imperative in order to succeed.

Sounds like good advice coming from someone who just two years ago could barely speak a word of English and is now a year away from earning her associate’s degree!