

The little engine that could: Former field worker turned literacy advocate earns her degree from PBSC

Laura Calderon, who was National Adult Learner of the Year in 2005, is among more than 2,600 fall graduates; two commencement ceremonies will be held Dec. 19

(BELLE GLADE, Fla. – Dec. 11, 2013) Clutching a book titled “The Little Engine That Could,” Laura Calderon’s then 3-year-old daughter asked her to read the popular children’s story to her. But, she couldn’t.

It was that moment in 1999 when the Belle Glade woman realized that she needed to learn English and get an education to help her family and herself. The next day, she began searching for an adult English program, and she and her daughter, now a junior at Dreyfoos School of the Arts, ended up in the Literacy Coalition of Palm Beach County Glades Family Education Program learning English together.

Calderon earned her GED in 2002 and later landed a job at the Literacy Coalition where she has worked for nine years teaching basic English, citizenship and computer skills. In 2005, she was named National Adult Learner of the Year and honored during a ceremony at the Library of Congress. She enrolled at Palm Beach State College to pursue an Associate in Arts degree, something she never thought was possible.

On Dec. 19, after years of hard work and juggling school with life, Calderon, 40, will don a cap and gown to accept her degree. She will share her own story of perseverance as the student speaker at one of two PBSC commencement ceremonies at the South Florida Fairgrounds in West Palm Beach.



Calderon is among 2,676 students being awarded degrees and certificates this term. The first ceremony will be held at 9:30 a.m. for the 1,530 Associate in Arts degree graduates. At 1 p.m. a second ceremony will be held for all other graduates, including those receiving certificates and Associate in Science and bachelor's degrees. The ceremonies will be streamed live online at www.palmbeachstate.edu.

"I feel so happy. It has been so difficult and so challenging. I still can't believe that I'm graduating. I never thought about getting an education, especially the first year in the United States, because everything was really hard without the language," said Calderon, who moved to Belle Glade from Mexico with her parents and four siblings in the 1980s. She attended 7th and 8th grade, but dropped out before high school to work alongside her father and siblings in the fields picking corn and cutting and rolling lettuce to help make ends meet.

"My main job was the field, and I never even dreamed about going to college," she said. "It has not been easy, but not impossible. It's a dream come true because I am the first one to go to college and get a degree."

Calderon, who is married and also has a 7-year-old son, said her entire family is excited about her earning her degree. She has requested that her two children be excused from school to attend her graduation.

"I really want them to see how important education is," she said. "We are not rich. We don't own a fortune to leave to our children, and the best thing that we can give them is education. That is something that no one can take away, and that is their future."

Serving 48,000 students annually, Palm Beach State College is the largest institution of higher education in Palm Beach County, providing bachelor's degrees, associate degrees, professional certificates, career training and lifelong learning. Established in 1933 as Florida's first public community college, it offers more than 100 programs of study at locations in Lake Worth, Boca Raton, Palm Beach Gardens and Belle Glade.

Editor's note: Contact College Relations and Marketing for a high-resolution photo Laura Calderon.

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