

# Overcoming Barriers

By  
Teresa Conway

Blanca Blanco remembers a time when she and her siblings used to wear three or four coats each *inside* their home to protect against the cold.

"We lived in a garage," says Blanco. "We had no heat and no water, but I didn't know we were poor. It was just normal." But nothing was ever really normal for Blanco.

Born in California to illegal immigrants, her parents took her to Mexico shortly after her birth. At the age of 9, Blanco and her family returned to the U.S. in search of a better life.

The family settled in Lake Chelan, Wash., and as her parents found work in the fields, Blanco found hope in the classroom. "I didn't have the money to buy a doll or toys, so I would just read," says Blanco. "I learned early on that while I may not have a lot of things, I can have knowledge, and that is the most important thing."

It's that message that Blanco is hoping to share with others through the big screen.





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Blanco now lives in Los Angeles and is producing and starring in a full-length feature film, which was shot at several locations in Pullman, Wash., this past fall. *Cruzando Barreras* tells the story of Lola, who at the age of 9, made the perilous journey across the desert, in the darkness of night, from Mexico to the United States in search of the American dream. Once across the border, she realizes that her difficulties have just begun as she faces the challenges of extreme poverty, language and cultural differences.

The character is fictional, but the story is all Blanco's. Director and screenwriter Albert Pedraza teamed up with Blanco to adapt her story into a movie script. The title *Cruzando Barreras* translates into overcoming barriers – something Blanco has a lot of experience with, literally and figuratively.

She was the first in her family to go to college, earning a bachelor's degree at Washington State before getting her master's in social work at Eastern Washington University in 2006. As a first-generation student, she couldn't turn to her family for help in navigating the higher education system, or for financial support. She relied on scholarships and worked three and four jobs to help support her family while she earned her degrees – all challenges that shaped her life, and the film.

When she's not acting or producing, Blanco is a part-time therapist in Los Angeles, where she does intervention referrals, working with patients who face anxiety or depression.

“Her journey is exactly the kind of narrative that motivates people to rise to their best capabilities,” says Professor Ed Byrnes, who taught Blanco at EWU. “This may inspire people toward academic pursuits, yet I think her story encourages people to rise to their best in any venue.”

Byrnes says the thing that struck him as remarkable about Blanco as a student was her intellectual versatility – she was as comfortable with science and quantification as she was with design and art.

“Additionally,” says Byrnes, “when I consider the distance she has traveled in her life and the genuine humility with which she conducts herself, I believe that she is well-rounded in her heart as well as her intellect.”

But it didn't come easy, and that's something Blanco hopes people, especially young Latinos, will take away from her film.

“It's an important message, especially because of the high (college) dropout rates in the Latino community,” says Blanco. “It's important for that audience to see and learn, ‘well, she went through all that and still got her degree, I can do it too.’”

Blanco is hoping to release *Cruzando Barreras* this spring, possibly through film festivals, and she's hoping to work with school districts as well to have the film used as an educational tool in the classroom. **E**

(To learn more about Blanca Blanco's film, visit [www.cruzandobarreras.com](http://www.cruzandobarreras.com))