

Once homeless, NCO gets rare shot to attend law school under Army program

By Joseph Lacdan, Army News Service

Fort Meade, Md. -- Each night Perla Gonzalez lay in hushed silence as she slept on a public restroom floor. She huddled against her backpack that contained only a single change of clothes and her textbooks.

Then a senior studying law and society at the University of California-Santa Barbara, she no longer had her close-knit family nearby, who had to suddenly move an hour away to Santa Maria, California, following a domestic dispute. Gonzalez had lived with her parents while attending classes and had to choose between moving or finishing her degree at the same institution.

Tired and hungry, she often hid in fear, worried that a janitor or another student might discover her.

She spent her senior year homeless as she struggled to finish her degree. Gonzalez had earned academic scholarships, but her part-time job didn't provide enough income to pay for a place to stay. Admittedly, she had too much pride to ask friends for help.

So Gonzalez slept in bathrooms, on benches, or whatever shelter she could find at night. She stayed at the university's library until it closed at midnight. When it became unbearable, she thought of her mother, Elena, who had worked long hours as a custodian while enduring beatings at home.

"My mom had put in so much effort into helping me get through school,"



Gonzalez, who emigrated from a small village in the central Mexico state of Zacatecas at 14-years-old, had seen injustice in her life and how the law did not always provide equal justice for everyone.

she said. "I just couldn't let her down."

Elena Gonzalez had left Santa Barbara in a rush, with only a few days to spend with her daughter.

Gonzalez, who emigrated from a small village in the central Mexico state of Zacatecas at 14-years-old, had seen injustice in her life and how the law did not always provide equal justice for everyone. So she decided to become a lawyer after witnessing her mother endure domestic violence and to prevent others from falling victim to injustice.

In December, Gonzalez took one step closer to achieving that goal when she became one of the first three enlisted



Perla Gonzalez

Soldiers to be accepted into the Army Judge Advocate General's Corps' Funded Legal Education Program, or FLEP. Last year, the Army opened the program to enlisted candidates for the first time since Congress authorized the program in 1973.

Under the FLEP, up to 25 active-duty officers and NCOs are selected each year to attend law school fulltime and tuition-free while retaining their rank, base pay, and allowances. In return, participants in the program -- known as "FLEPs" -- must fulfill a six-year commitment to serve as an Army lawyer.

More info at www.army.mil