

Jennifer Sandoval

Santa Ana College Alum shares her story of struggle, family, and rising from the ashes.



Three Strikes to Success

Nearly two decades before preparing to walk away from her journey at Santa Ana College with a psychology and liberal arts degree, Jennifer Sandoval stumbled. Many times.

Fueled by generational addiction, violence, and a near-fatal event, she falls the Phi Theta Kappa scholar and Los Angeles County native endured were hard, humiliating, and void of hope. That is until she listened to her voice and firmly grasped the idea that the best days of her life were, as they had always been, on the other side of the constant trauma that robbed her of a strong and healthy future.

“Never let success get to your head. Never let failure get to your heart.”

— Anonymous

Family Ties

“I grew up in a pretty volatile household,” says Jennifer of life with parents who battled drug addiction. Even with a dad in and out of prison and a mom who desperately tried to keep her substance abuse at bay, Jennifer aimed to break the cycle of affliction through education. “I always did my best in school, recalling her younger years as a straight-A student. I was super tenacious and a perfectionist.”

Despite her best efforts, Jennifer ultimately became a product of her environment. By high school, household disruption left her on the streets as her behavior and academic outlook declined. While she would go on to earn her diploma, the celebration was short-lived. Only a few years later, at 19, Jennifer was jailed for selling marijuana. Strike One.

Although she would establish an administration career with a healthy salary, her downward cycle continued, leading to devastating events, including a point-blank range gunshot wound during a drug deal gone bad, serving jail time, and ultimately, relapsing from addiction. Strike Two.

After what Jennifer says was pressure from the District Attorney to testify against the assailant who almost ended her life, Jennifer was in a dark place. She'd moved to Orange County and was trying to overcome scars from the shooting, both physical and emotional. She was in a bind. Though Jennifer was gainfully employed and earning a decent living while enrolled at SAC, an ordinarily routine surgery sidelined her for much longer than anticipated. Knowing that just sixty percent of her income on disability would jeopardize her ability to stay enrolled, she panicked. “I didn't know how I was going to get through the semester.” While she had options to fill the gaps, they could put her back on a destructive path.

That's when Santa Ana College stepped in.

The Purpose Driven Life

After hearing about Project RISE, a SAC club for formerly incarcerated and system-impacted students, Jennifer did something she had never felt comfortable doing: accepting help. “One of my advisors, Mark McCallick, suggested I reach out to the SAC Foundation,” she says. Bedridden with her laptop perched on her chest, Jennifer quickly applied for a grant. The Foundation rushed the application, and shortly after, she was approved. “It was the amount I was missing for being out of work for two months.”

Through it all, Jennifer was never alone, crediting her faith in God for the divine intervention, along with her SAC “guardian angel,” Mark. “He’s my biggest cheerleader, a father figure. If it weren’t for my involvement in Project RISE, I wouldn’t be where I’m at today,” says Jennifer. “He has such a heart to help us [students] and to serve us – he just wants us to succeed. I owe my entire success to him.”

Rise Up

As the outgoing President of Project RISE and on the verge of realizing her courage and persistence pay off, Jennifer is standing tall—poised to soar, not only for herself and her family but for the chorus of Californians, especially women and families that need their voices amplified. Her next move will bring her closer to that goal. In the fall, Jennifer will study Criminology, Law, and Society at UC Irvine, with plans to become a criminal psychologist. “I love to advocate for those individuals that have lost their voice.”

Strike Three is an uncontested win for the woman who repeatedly turned her life around by refusing to throw in the towel on her dreams or herself.

Like Mother, Like Son

Through all the challenges and setbacks, Jennifer always had a cheering squad in her mother and son, Jeremiah. “He’s one of my biggest supporters,” she says. So instead of paying the ultimate price, Jennifer will do what she has done countless times throughout her life, sacrifice. It will be from afar when she turns her tassel to the side on degree day. Instead of walking the SAC stage, she will proudly leap out of her seat to cheer Jeremiah on at his high school graduation, which falls on the same day as her ceremony. The pair have come a long way and are now thriving and celebrating success. Together.

Jennifer plans to keep meeting her challenges but knows that stumbling is par for the course. What’s not, she says, is staying down. “I know that when I fail again, it will be a speed bump along the road,” she says. “Failure is not an option.”



Jennifer Sandoval with her son, Jeremiah