

EXPOSURE



A DREAM TURNED REALITY

Kerman mayor finds strength in social work

Story by [Fresno State](#)

October 9th, 2024

When Kerman Mayor Maria Pacheco graduated from Fresno State this past May with her bachelor's degree in social work, it was more than just a special moment – it was a dream come true and a long time coming for the mother of six.

Now, she's expanding on her dream by pursuing her Master of Social Work degree this fall as part of the [Title IV-E Child Welfare Program](#), in which she hopes to further her policy and advocacy work around the Indian Child Welfare Act.

"I became a mother at a very young age," Pacheco said. "By the time I graduated high school

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used to drive down Shaw Avenue and my heart would ache, wishing I had the opportunity so many of my friends had.”

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Pacheco saw her pursuits of higher education live out within her own daughter, Angelica, who graduated from the university four years before Pacheco. Inspired by her daughter and fueled by her own lifelong dreams, Pacheco decided to forge her own higher education journey, enrolling at Fresno State in fall 2022.

However, this wasn't an ordinary journey for Pacheco. When she enrolled, she was also in the midst of her first Kerman mayoral campaign. She won that historic race by just 90 votes and became the first Latina of Indigenous roots to serve as the city's mayor.

“My motivation to run for mayor stemmed from a genuine desire to make a tangible difference in Kerman's growth and well-being, building upon the successes I had already achieved in my previous endeavors,” Pacheco said.

When Pacheco was officially sworn in one month later, she was also in the middle of finishing her end-of-semester exams at Fresno State.

“It was all happening at the same time and, yes, I felt anxious, but I also knew that I had to power through it – and I did,” Pacheco recalled. “I got up there, did what I had to do, and even aced my finals. I am lucky to have been incredibly successful at both school and my position as mayor.”

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Now – just two years after her whirlwind election – Pacheco is ready to do it all over again.



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A SECOND CHANCE

Much like her original journey at Fresno State, Pacheco is starting off her graduate program while also seeking reelection next month and vying for a second term as mayor.

This time, Pacheco is coming in with a seasoned perspective and a newfound confidence.

“I know what I want to do, and I know what it all entails to get there,” Pacheco said. “I’m coming into this semester and campaign season with my eyes wide open and I’m ready to accomplish everything I set my mind to. No matter what happens, I know that having a master’s degree will take me to the next level and unlock opportunities I never thought possible.”

Pacheco said the social work program and the education she’s received at Fresno State have made all the difference in her experience this time around and have played a key role in the impact she’s able to make in her community.

“I always say politics is social work,” Pacheco said. “I think that all politicians should see things through the lens of a social worker.”

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deeper into the different levels of social work, from micro to macro level, and realize that everything I'm doing now as mayor is encompassed within this. Because of my education, I've been able to make quite a big impact here in my community, including advocating for millions of dollars for a variety of projects here in the city. A part of that is because I've learned how relationships work and how to bring in those resources to my community. It really has everything to do with my social work education and experience.”

According to faculty, Pacheco's impact goes beyond the Central Valley.

“Mayor Pacheco's imagination, persistence and humility as she leverages resources for the residents of Kerman inspires me,” said Dr. Travis Cronin, associate professor in the **Department of Social Work Education**. “Her intersectional experiences – as a mayor, as a woman of color and as a social work student – is influencing social workers across the country.”

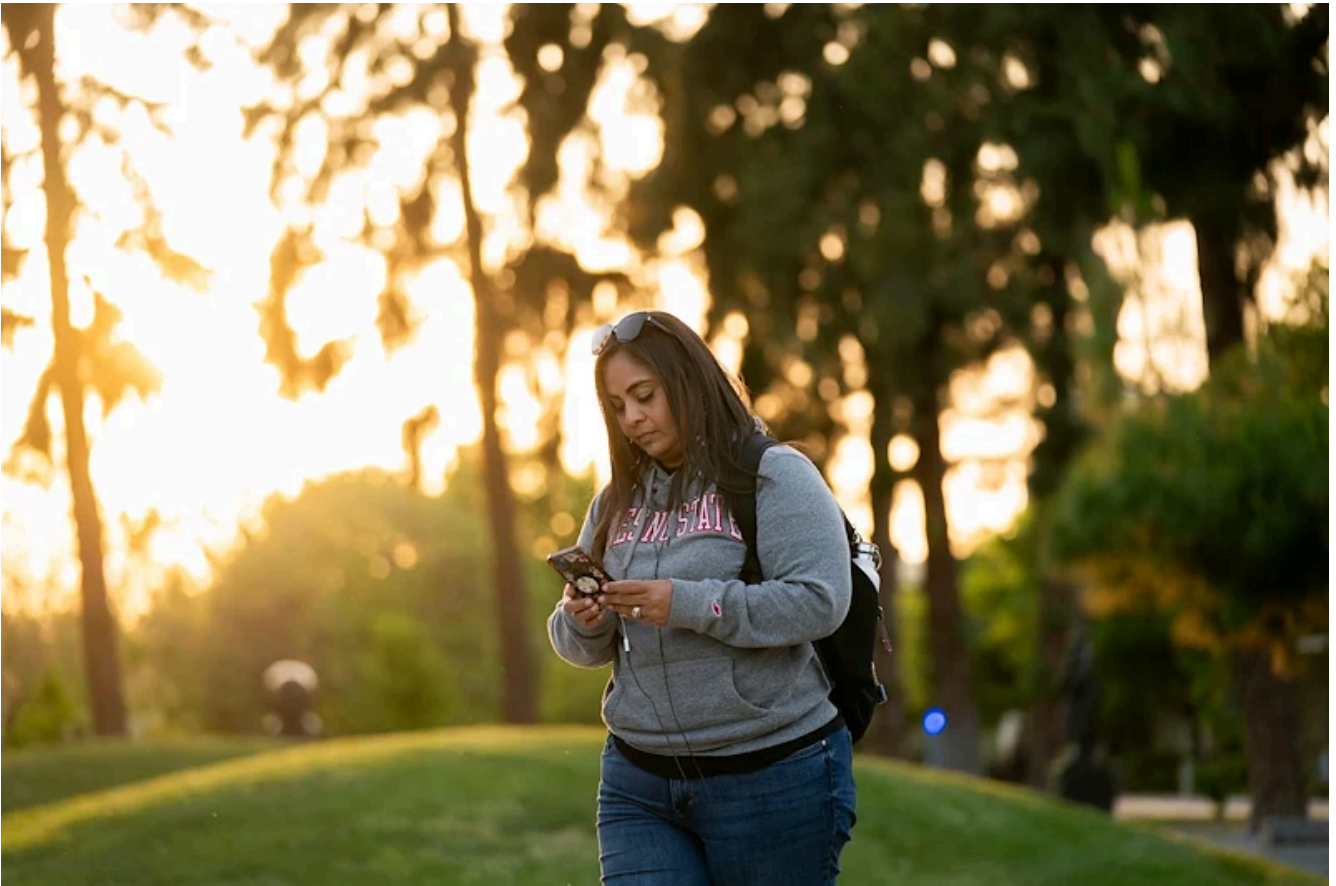
Looking back on her professional career, Pacheco realized she was a social worker by nature all along whether she was volunteering with at-risk youth, or serving as a human resource manager, as an advocate at a women's resource center or as the executive director of nonprofit Higher Education For All. In each of these roles, her passion for the profession intensified.

This solidified her decision to pursue both a bachelor's and master's degree in social work at Fresno State, which she said aligns well with her leadership role.

“By combining my social work background with political advocacy, I hope to make a meaningful impact on the lives of those in need and work towards a more equitable and inclusive society,” Pacheco said. “Social work is who I am, not what I do.”



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MAKING AN IMPACT

When Pacheco is home, away from the hustle and bustle of city hall, she is known simply as “Mom.”

“It’s so nice to walk through my front door and to just be a normal person,” Pacheco said. “Outside that door, I’m the mayor, but inside that door, I’m just ‘Mom,’ and I love that. Although it’s been tough for my husband and children they are so proud of me. The love and support they have for me is what keeps me going.”

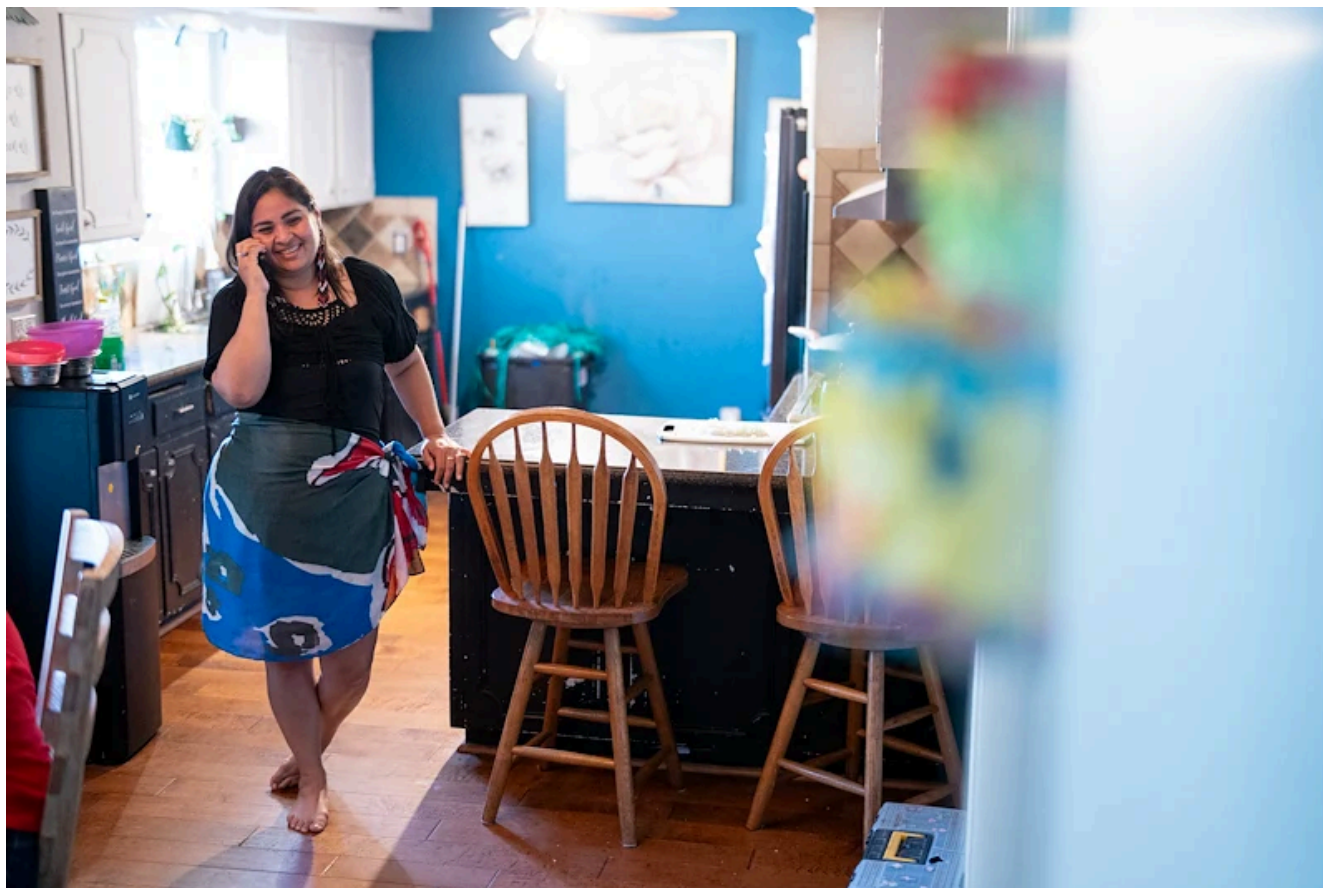
Pacheco said having the chance to experience life as a full-time mom prior to becoming a full-time Fresno State student was one of the best decisions she made as it prepared her beautifully for her next chapter of life.

Today, in Pacheco’s day-to-day life, she fits in her civic and mayoral duties in between classes, internships and extracurricular activities, and also on the weekends. In addition to her many roles as student, mayor, mom and social worker, Pacheco is also the president of the Trabajadores de la Raza social work student club on campus and co-founder of FUERZA, a grassroots organization of community leaders in Kerman.

Pacheco knows her many roles and educational goals come with a great deal of responsibility

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"An education is invaluable in the way that it makes you feel and in the way that others see you," Pacheco said. "I know this degree isn't just about me. It's about those who come after me. It's about those that look like me."



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Footnote: Story by Melissa Tav — College of Health and Human Services, Video by Matt Mealer, Photos by Cary Edmondson— University Marketing and Communications

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