

EXPOSURE



WITH HEART ON HORSEBACK

Life on the farm: Annabelle Ortega

Story by [Fresno State](#)

April 20th, 2020

The rural town of Lagunillas, Mexico is known for its natural beauty. With a population as little as 100, the town is brimming with red dirt roads, farmland and surrounding forests.

Away from internet access and big city commotion, Lagunillas is where Annabelle Ortega spent her summers as a child.

“Every summer since I was 4 years old, my parents sent my brother and me to Mexico,” Annabelle says. “That’s where my passion for horses first began.”

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Annabelle stayed with her grandparents in Lagunillas. She recalls her grandfather and uncles riding horses to do farm work, but as a girl, she was never allowed to ride.

“They would always be like, ‘No, you can’t ride. You’re little and you’re a girl. We don’t want you to get hurt,’” she says. “Sometimes I would run away and do it on my own, but I would always get in trouble for that.”

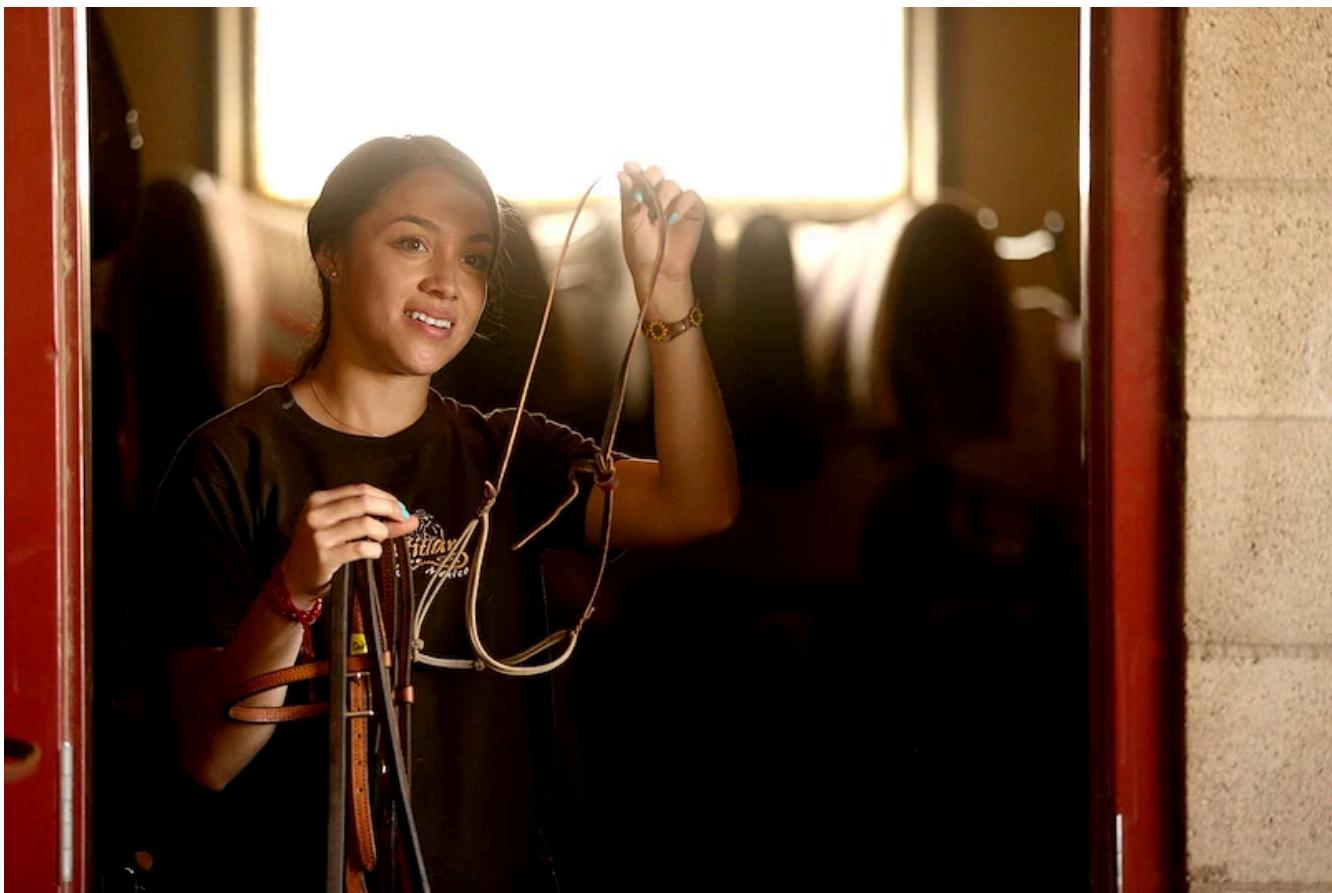
Most of Annabelle’s female cousins stayed indoors and had homemaking responsibilities. Her male family members were responsible for farm work, which included tending to horses. But Annabelle insisted on spending time outdoors, helping her grandfather and uncles with work, spending hours grooming the horses.

“I just fell in love,” Annabelle says. “It was something that just happened naturally — something about the horses.”



→ Did you know? Fresno State’s Equine Unit is one of over 20 campus farm enterprises that serve as outdoor laboratories and classrooms.

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BRAVE BEGINNINGS

Annabelle spent her school years in the small town of Winton, California with her parents. She calls it a “barrio” town, and while there is poverty, Annabelle says she “loved it.”

“It was a place that really humbled me and made me who I am today,” she adds.

Annabelle is the first in her family to attend college. She chose to attend Fresno State because of its proximity to her hometown and its animal science program. As a freshman, she is channeling her passion for horses into an academic emphasis in equine science.

“I chose this major because I enjoy being outside, being with large animals,” she says. “Mexico influenced me and had an impact on that.”

Last semester, Annabelle worked hands-on with horses three days a week in the University’s colt training class. Students in the class work with professional trainers and learn to handle horses according to the standard of today’s industry. They share the common goal of raising talented, respectful and healthy horses.

“The students get the opportunity to get out of the normal classroom setting and into an outdoor learning environment,” says instructor Jason Contreras. “The student learns to be responsible and have work ethic.”

Annabelle says she had never learned to ride a horse Western style. She fumbled with the new techniques but through this course, she gained a connection to her assigned horse, Dahlia.

“Annabelle is a very good student. She works hard and is eager to learn,” Jason says. “I saw a growth in her horse-handling skills this semester.”

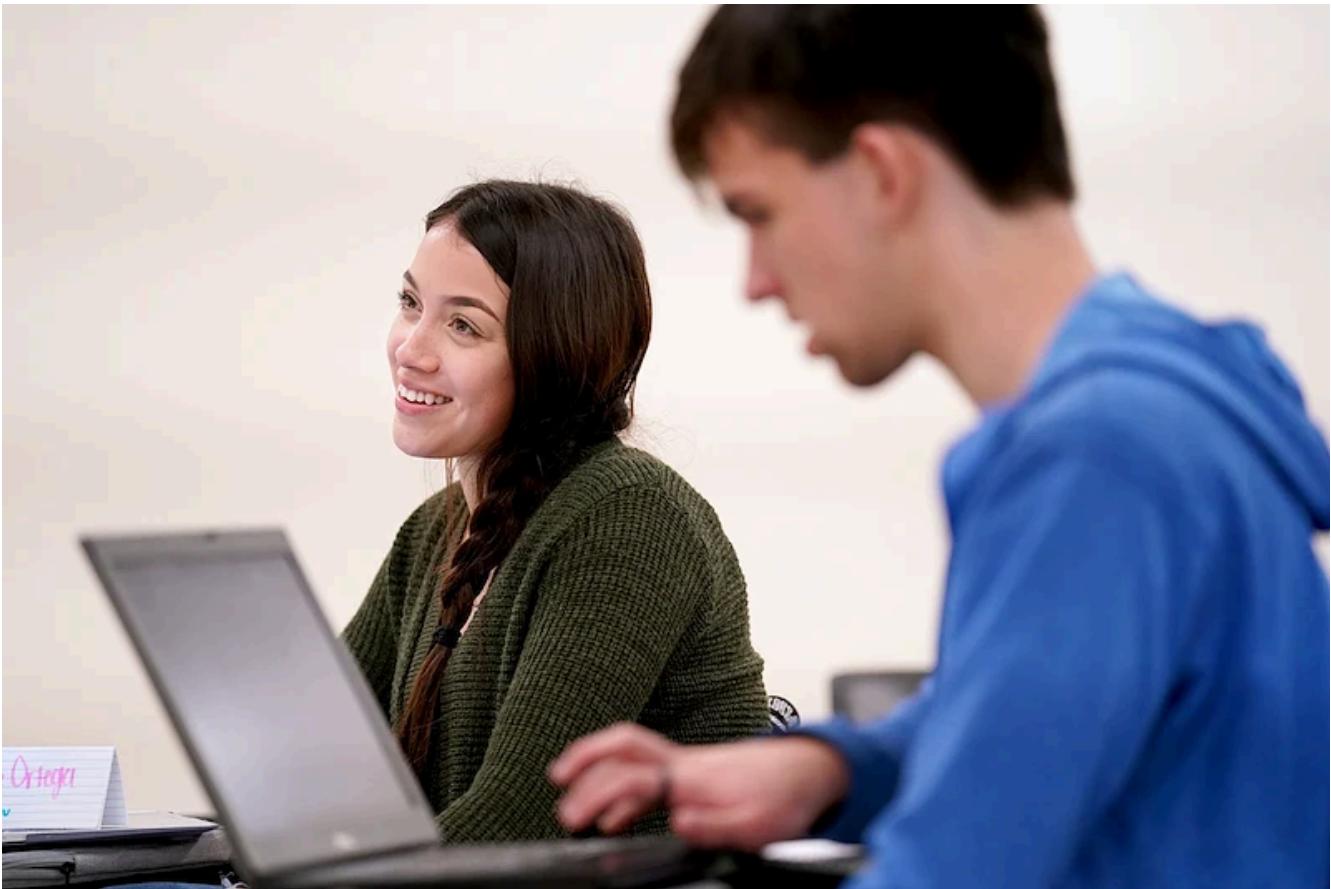
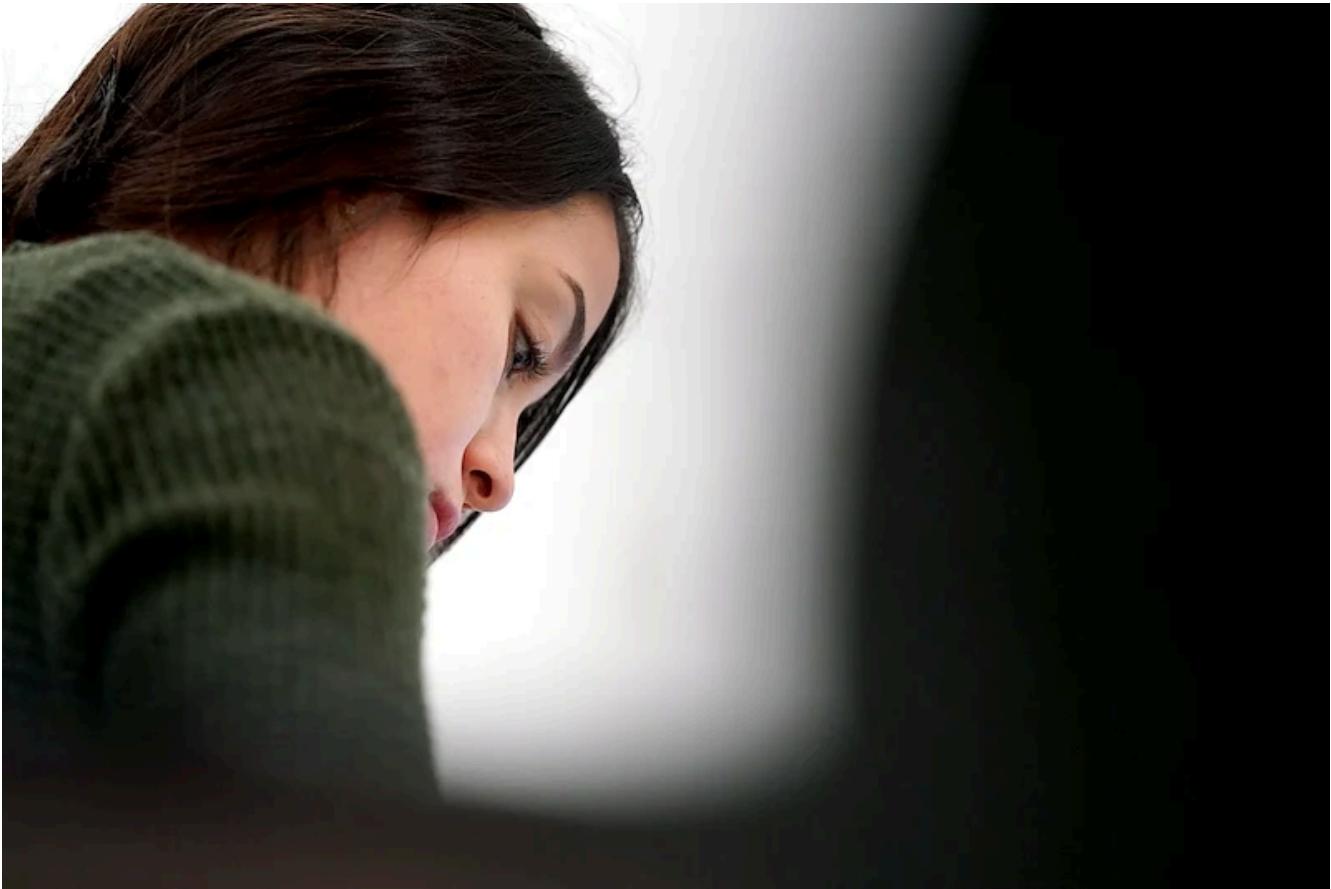


→ Did you know? Eighty class sections are taught annually within the University's farm enterprises.

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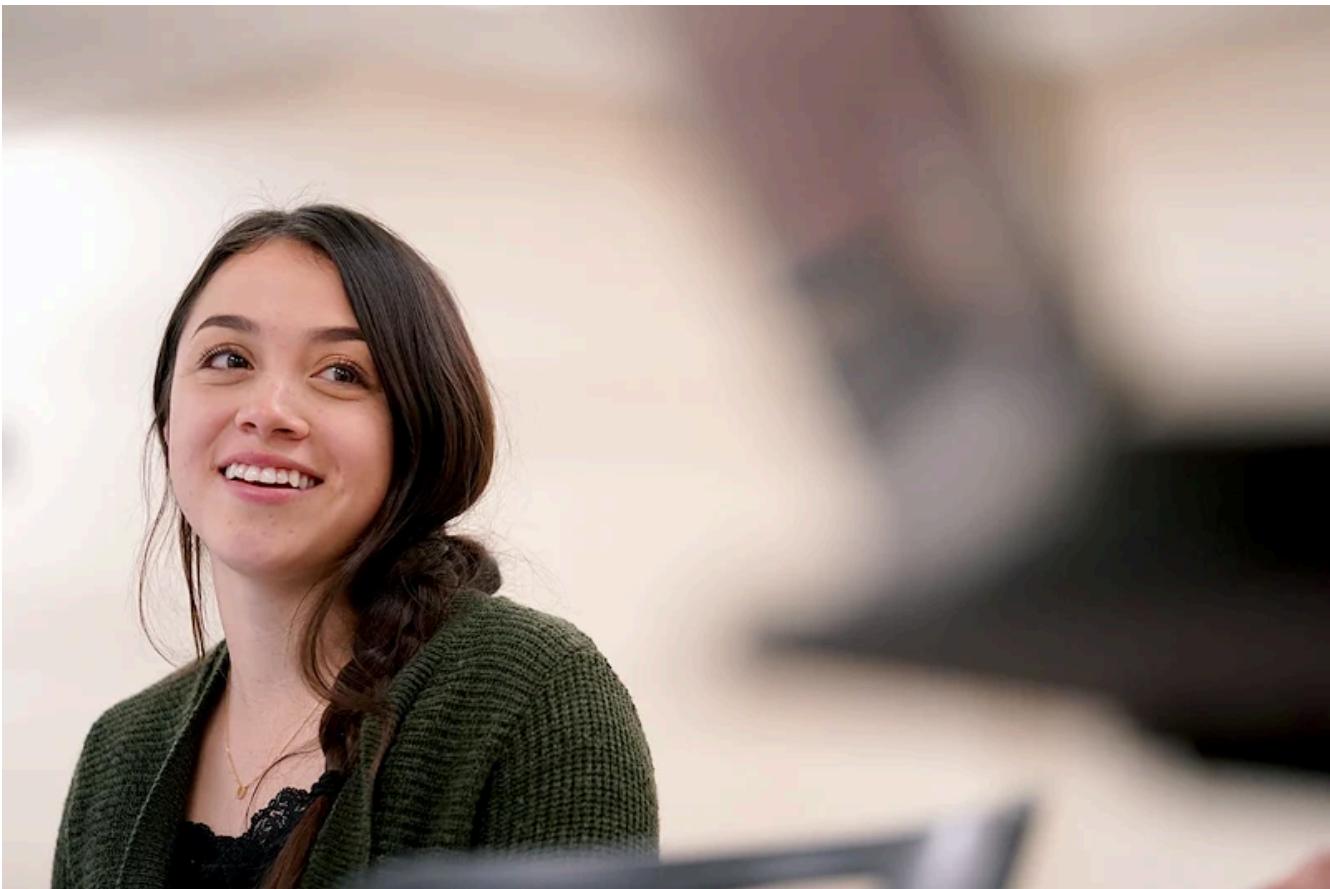
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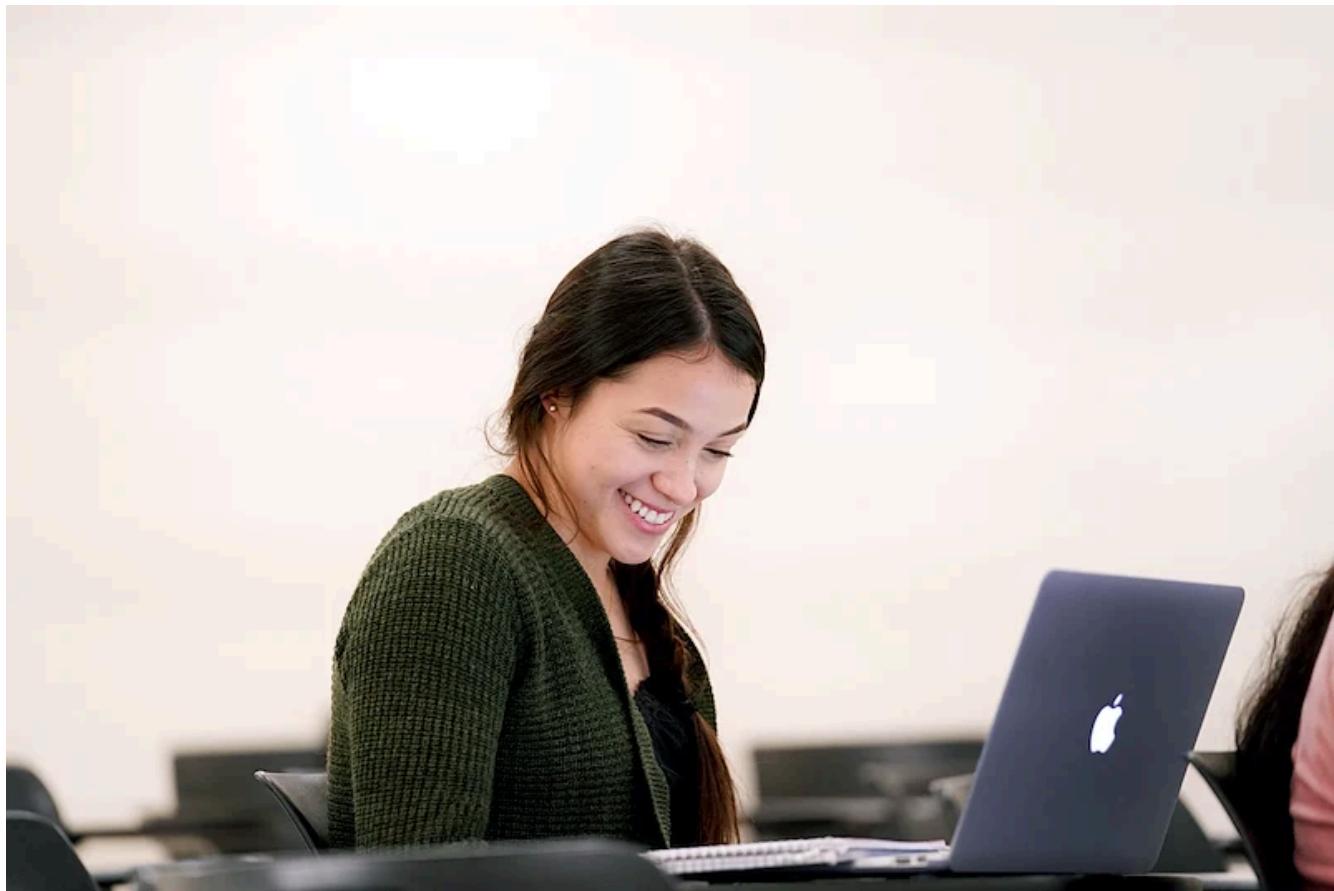
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SADDLING UP

Last year, Annabelle spent most of her free time practicing with an escaramuza team, El Caporal. The eight-member, all-female team rides horses in a choreographed synchronized manner, wearing matching traditional Mexican dresses, sombreros and accessories. She learned how to ride side saddle and perform with her teammates to the rhythm of a Spanish song. Her team competed throughout the state.

“Joining the team gave me a chance to build a relationship with my horse, made me a better rider and made my passion grow a lot,” she says.

With her knowledge from the escaramuza team and newly-acquired skills she is gaining from Fresno State, Annabelle says her passion for horses is only growing.

“This colt training class has taught me so much. I’ve never been around anything like this — it’s the same but different. I know the Mexican culture and now I am learning Western riding,” she says.

As she reflects on where her passion for horses began, she adds:

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“I have never seen horses as work tools. In Lagunillas, I gained the love and passion I have to them.”



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Footnote: *Photos by Cary Edmondson, Story by Esra Hashem, Video by Daniel Teran— University Brand Strategy and Marketing*

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