

Drive to Succeed



Martha Avila spent 20 years of her life packaging vegetables – broccoli, melon, cauliflower – depending upon the season. She would often rise at 1:00 or 2:00 a.m., arrive at the pick-up site and pile into a bus to be transported 1-2 hours to Coachella or Yuma, Arizona. The persistent and unrelenting heat of the Imperial Valley and nearby regions made work in summer months dreadful. Being a single mother of four, she was trying to provide as best as she could. Her parents were a big help, taking the kids to school and preparing meals. Martha would get home from a long day of work with only a couple of hours to spend with her children before their bed time.

Eventually Martha realized she couldn't continue to live this way: always exhausted, missing her children, and struggling to make ends meet. She began thinking about what she might be able to do other than farm work. "I never liked working in stores [as a] salesman or cashier" Martha states. She had worked as a cashier previously, but found it very stressful. However, truck driving had interested Martha for as long as she could remember. Her son, Jesus Fernandez, had enrolled in the Green Building Construction Skills training program at Center for Employment Training (CET) in March 2015 and had qualified for the National Farmworker Jobs Program (NFJP) grant as a dependent of hers. When her son graduated, he began working as a solar installer earning \$14 per hour. By the time his mother was touring CET's Truck Driver program, Jesus had already received a raise to \$16 per hour. In seeing his success, Martha seized the opportunity to obtain training.



Martha came to CET El Centro to begin training as a Truck Driver, an opportunity which she feels she would not have had if not for the financial support that was provided through the program. She explained that having the tuition paid allowed her to begin training, but the additional money provided through the stipend allowed her to remain and complete training.

Training commenced for Martha in August 2016. The transition from work to training was easy; she was excited and eager to learn. Within six months, she had successfully completed training and was ready for work. She recounts with pride, "My Instructor, Alex Santoyo, recommended me to my boss. I left school on Friday, February 24 and on Monday, I started working."



Martha was hired at CP Transport Inc. as a truck driver with an official start date of March 1, 2017. She works a routine: On Monday, she picks up a load in Los Angeles, CA and drives it to Texas, where she arrives on Thursday. She then picks up another load which she hauls back to LA. However, on Friday night, she stops at home in Calexico. She now has the weekends off, valuable time that she gets to spend with her children. Monday morning, she returns to LA and begins her route again. She explains how with truck driving, she gets paid by the load and receives about \$1000 per week.

“It was the best decision I’ve taken. I work less and make more money”, she laughs. “The six months in the school was amazing. My Instructors Gerardo Rodriguez and Alex Santoyo were very intelligent, patient, and very helpful with me. Now I can take care of my son and my daughters. I’m so happy right now. I love my job very much.”

When asked what it is like to be a female truck driver in a male-dominated field, Martha responds: “From the beginning in the fields, I was supported by all my co-workers. They always said that if there was a woman capable of being a good truck driver, it was me. At work, I always find other drivers loading or unloading and they always give me encouragement to go forward. My kids, they say that whenever they say that their mom is a truck driver, people are surprised. They feel proud whenever that happens. Also, I’ve found female operators, secretaries, and female cleaning staff who ask me if it is easy to drive a truck. They say that they would also like to drive a truck.”



As for Martha’s youngest daughter, who has gotten to observe her mother as a farm worker, as a student, and now as a truck driver, she is extra proud of her mother. Martha has demonstrated that it’s never too late to learn to do something different. She is glad she followed her dream and is now able to do a job she loves and set an example for her family as well as for other women who never considered the possibility of entering a non-traditional field. She carries that message with her every week, from Los Angeles to Texas, Calexico, and back to LA. *Si Se Puede.*