



Tribune photos by Antonio Perez

Lucy Trevino (center), 24, of Cicero checks her e-mail as her mother, Rosa, reads a newspaper in a computer lab on the University of Illinois at Chicago campus.

» LUCY

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absorbed lectures in calculus or thermodynamics or circuit analysis, Rosa sat not far away, just in case Lucy needed a sip of water or began choking.

Lucy, who is 24, was told she had a rare genetic degenerative disease, spinal muscular atrophy, when she was 4. SMA is a progressive disease that withers the muscles that control the arms, legs and lungs, and makes breathing a struggle.

Lucy's type of SMA usually takes away your ability to walk by the time you're in your teens—she began using a wheelchair at age 9—but unlike some other types, doesn't necessarily affect life span.

Lucy, who is the oldest of four, has a younger brother, Hugo, who has the same disease. He, too, uses a wheelchair; he's a freshman at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, studying architecture.

Parental dedication

"Lucy's story is about the sacrifices our mothers make for all of us," said Pete Nelson, interim dean of UIC's engineering college. Trevino's teachers, he said, "were pounding down my door" to ask for some recognition for this mother-daughter feat of unconditional devotion.



Rosa Trevino (right) presses a button to lift her daughter, Lucy, a UIC engineering student, into their van while Lucy's father, Hugo, watches outside their Cicero home.

At UIC, where nearly a third of the students are the first in a family to go to college, Nelson said it's not uncommon to hear tales of parents working two or three jobs, sending money from overseas and just plain struggling so their kids can get what parents weren't afforded.

"But this is sort of the pinnacle in terms of the amount of dedication," said Nelson. "This is what makes this business worthwhile."

One of the professors pounding on Nelson's door was Michael Cho, who teaches mostly graduate courses in cell and tissue engineering, but who has gotten to know—and been amazed by—the ubiquitous mother-daughter duo, so often spotted wending their way up a ramp, on or off an elevator, or tucked away studying in some secluded corner.

"The first thing that comes to my mind is this can't be anything else but a mother's

love," Cho said. "It goes beyond commitment. It is sacrificial love. And I am just overwhelmed. It's not just one month or one semester. It's every day for the last four years that I can think of."

In fact, it's six years, because Lucy had to take time off when she got really sick her junior year; she suddenly couldn't lift her arms and was quickly losing memory.

It took months before a sleep test showed she stopped breathing 30 times an hour when she was asleep. She now sleeps with a machine that helps her breathe, and, within a week of using it, she said, she regained her memory, if not her arm strength.

"Ever since I was little, I loved science," said Lucy, who shares her mother's deep cocoa-colored eyes and rolls around campus in a purple wheelchair with back wheels that sparkle, like fireworks,

IN THE WEB EDITION



For video and photo gallery of Rose and Lucy Trevino, go to chicagotribune.com/lucy

with tiny neon bits. "Because I went to doctors a lot and had a lot of medical exams, I would always wonder, 'How do those devices work?'"

In her senior year at Morton West High School in Berwyn, Trevino learned from a counselor about a summer camp in bioengineering at UIC, so she signed up, and found her life's work.

She once dreamed of working to find a cure for her own disease, but decided "it would be too stressful if I couldn't find it."

The first one in her family to ever go to college, Lucy Trevino said she was "too afraid" to venture down to the U. of I.

in Urbana-Champaign, where there's a whole dorm for students with disabilities, and the nation's oldest college-level disabilities-services program provides trained personal assistants, physical therapy, even wheelchair repairs.

"I didn't know if I should risk going all the way down there," she said.

Sticking closer to home seemed like a better plan. But because UIC doesn't have a personal-assistants program, she was stuck trying to find someone who could help her in a thousand little ways and be there whenever she needed.

"In college, you have such a crazy schedule. You stay after to study with other students. You need to talk to a professor. I was like, 'Oh, my gosh, how am I going to find someone who's going to put up with all of that?'"

"My mom was like, 'Well, I guess I'll just go with you.'"

"And then it was getting closer to the start of the first semester, and I still hadn't found anybody. She said, 'How would you feel if I went with you?' I was like, 'Oh, my gosh, would you?'"

Because Rosa Trevino, who is 47 and moved from Mexico when she was 17, had two children with special needs, she had long since become a stay-at-home mom, giving up a series of baby-sitting jobs. Rosa's husband, Hugo, retired last year after 32 years as a CTA bus driver. Rosa herself had never even been to high school.

On the day back in 1987 when doctors said her little girl would "someday need a wheelchair," Rosa recalled, crying at the memory, she promised herself she would do "everything I can."

Mother keeps busy

Even if that meant sitting through more than 2,100 hours of 51 classes, countless study sessions and hourlong train rides, back and forth, each day. Most often, Lucy said with a laugh, her mother spends time cutting recipes and coupons, because she gets bored with all the bioengineering in a language she doesn't fully understand.

At first, Lucy admitted, going to college with her mother wasn't exactly without its bumps.

"I had never spent so much time together with my mom. We would sometimes get on each other's nerves," she said, chuckling. "But then we got to know each other really well. We're like best friends. Now I tell her everything. Before I wouldn't tell her everything that happens when you have a disability. People who aren't in a wheelchair can't understand. But now, since we do everything together she knows."

Semester after semester, year after year, Lucy and her mother found a way. She passed 400-level exams. She wrote up labs that took her twice the time of everyone else, simply because the pushing of a pen on paper is so hard for her.

Once, a civil engineering professor noticed that because of Lucy's wheelchair, she couldn't write on her desk. He challenged her to design a light-weight writing table. Then he went and built it. She got an A.

Mostly, the Trevinos relied on each other, and on unflagging faith.

"One time I think in the night, almost for an hour: I cry to on high, 'Why me? Why me?'" Rosa said. "I heard a voice, 'Why not me?'"

For those who watched their unswerving perseverance, the simple fact that the Trevinos never stumbled inscribed a lasting honor on Lucy's college transcript.

"One time last year," Lucy said, "a student told me she'd felt like ditching class, staying home. But then she looks and says, 'There's Lucy, she's always here. There's nothing wrong with me. I'm just lazy.'"

"Wow, I didn't even think that anyone noticed me."

Come Mother's Day weekend, when Nelson tries to make it through his heartfelt salutation to a student and a mother who taught them all a lesson, chances are Lucy and Rosa Trevino will finally understand just how much a whole college noticed.

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