

MARICRUZ QUINTANILLA

DIVISION MANAGER I COUNTY CLERK'S OFFICE



There is a particular kind of busyness that can make taking care of yourself feel optional. For Maricruz Quintanilla, it was college.

Quintanilla, 25, now works as a division manager with the Hidalgo County Clerk's Office, where she handles internal auditing. Before arriving at the county, she focused on school, first earning her bachelor's degree and then pursuing a master's while beginning her career.

She had been active growing up, playing soccer in middle school and part of high school. But somewhere between classes, studying and the pressure to finish what she had started, exercise and wellness became less of a priority.

"When I was in school, it was a really big thing for me, where I focused primarily on school, and I feel like I neglected my health," Quintanilla said. "Obviously, you know, work, studying, school — that was my priority."

There was no dramatic health scare that forced her to reconsider. In fact, Quintanilla considers herself fortunate that there wasn't one. The change was quieter.

While pursuing her master's degree and beginning her job with the county, she was balancing school with the demands of a new career. Health, she said, was "the last thing" on her mind. And eventually, she could feel it.

"I felt the change," she said. "I felt just not good."

After school, Quintanilla began making room for her health again. Running became one of her biggest

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hobbies. She has participated in several 5Ks through the county and races outside of work too. She completed a 10K last November and has set her sights on a half-marathon. She has also participated in several of the Wellness Program's step challenges.

But the interesting thing about Quintanilla's approach to wellness isn't really the races or the number on her step tracker. It's what happens around her because she is doing those things. Her colleagues notice.

Someone described her enthusiasm as "contagious." Others said Quintanilla motivated them to sign up for 5Ks, begin working toward their own fitness goals, make healthier food choices or simply walk more. Another credited that encouragement with returning to a 5K

after two years away from running and ultimately finishing among the top 10 out of more than 300 participants.

Someone else described something considerably less intimidating than a race: Quintanilla's "15-minute hot girl break walks," an invitation to get away from the office air, get outside and get moving.

That might actually capture her philosophy better than anything else. You don't have to become a runner to completely reinvent your life. Sometimes you just need to go for a walk.

"Getting outside, going for a walk is so healing," Quintanilla said. "That's something I always encourage people to do. You know, people are always wanting to change, but they don't find the motivation and sharing with them that something as simple as a walk can be, like, so healing for anyone."

"I'm very hopeful about my future. So being able to do it physically, that motivates me."

She has watched that philosophy spread through the County Clerk's Office. When Quintanilla saw one of the first county 5Ks after she began working there, she was excited to participate. Her coworkers were not quite as enthusiastic. So she kept asking.

"Let's do it, let's do it," she remembers telling them.

Eventually, five or six people joined her. For another 5K, she persuaded four members of the seven-person bookkeeping team she

oversees to participate, whether they wanted to walk, run or simply be there. She has done the same with the Step It Up Challenge, encouraging coworkers and friends to join and turning it into a friendly competition over who can collect more finisher pins or reach a higher step tier. The Wellness Program may provide the opportunity, but people like Quintanilla help make participation feel approachable.

She has embraced many of the resources offered through the Employee Wellness Program. She participates in the step challenges, tunes in to webinars and meets with the program's nutritionist when she visits the office. Quintanilla reads the educational material sent to employees and occasionally finds herself repeating something she learned in conversations with coworkers or family members. Sometimes, someone will ask where she learned it.

"Oh, the flier that they sent," she'll tell them, or she'll explain that it came from a conversation with the nutritionist.

The program, she said, has made her more aware of health topics she might not otherwise stop to think about. Even small informational reminders can bring health back to the front of people's minds.

Just as important, Quintanilla said she found a workplace culture where stepping away from the desk to take care of yourself feels encouraged. In previous workplaces, she didn't necessarily feel the same freedom to take a break or go for a walk. At the county, and particularly within her office, she said there is greater encouragement to look after yourself physically and mentally.

Quintanilla has taken that idea beyond the

office. She now finds herself encouraging her parents to think about their health, a reversal she finds a little funny.

“The tables kind of turn when you’re older,” she said. At some point, the parents who once looked after you start hearing reminders from you to take care of themselves. Her sisters have felt that influence too.

Quintanilla lives with her older sister, who began hearing all about the Step It Up Challenge as Quintanilla tried to reach her daily goals. During one 15,000-step challenge, that sometimes meant coming home and realizing there was still walking to do. Eventually, her sister started joining her.

Her sister had recently had a baby and was on maternity leave. Getting outside gave her an opportunity to do something for herself while also getting out with her baby. During the most recent challenge, the two began walking together. Then there were Quintanilla’s younger sisters, who stayed with them during the summer. She got them walking too.

At first, it wasn’t something they normally did. But after a while, something shifted. On days when Quintanilla didn’t feel like going, her younger sisters were suddenly the ones asking her: Aren’t we going to walk?

Before they returned home, Quintanilla gave them a simple instruction: Don’t stop. They still send her photos of their walks, sometimes with the dog, sometimes around the neighborhood.

It’s a small example of how one person’s habits can spread. Quintanilla believes simply seeing another person make the effort can make wellness seem more attainable.

“I think it helps other people see someone do it or talk about it,” she said. She shares her races and other activities with the people around her, and sometimes the response is simple: “Mari is doing it. That’s cool.” Then comes the reaction, “We’ll do it together.”

For Quintanilla, the motivation behind it all comes back to her family and the future. She wants to experience what comes next in her life, and she wants to be physically able to experience it alongside the people she loves.

“I’m very hopeful about my future,” she said. “So being able to do it physically, that motivates me.”

Maybe that is why she doesn’t believe people should wait for something to go wrong before they begin taking their health seriously.

Her own experience wasn’t defined by a diagnosis or a crisis. It was simply a period when other priorities crowded health out. School mattered. Work mattered. Finishing what she had started mattered. Then she realized taking care of herself mattered too.

“You don’t have to wait for some life-changing crisis to happen to you to care about your health,” Quintanilla said. “I think it’s important to start now and to care now.”

Her advice, ultimately, is uncomplicated. Start now.

“We shouldn’t need a wake-up call to prioritize ourselves or to care about ourselves,” she said. “We should want better.”

And if starting means a race someday, great. If it means 15 minutes outside with a coworker, that counts too.

