

## THE STORY GOES | JESSICA GUTIERREZ | UPGRADE SATX

**MOLLY:** Hey there, it's Molly Cox with SA2020, and this is The Story Goes, which is a fantastic partnership between SA2020 and KLRN. And just to give you sort of a recap, we are going to be talking to people and the organizations who are quietly, and sometimes loudly, changing San Antonio, and trying to give you sort of a full story of what's going on in our city. Um, this is the pilot. This is the first one that we've attempted, and we will see how it goes. I'm here with Jessica Gutierrez, who has become one of my favorite human beings in San Antonio, Texas. Um, she pays me to say that. (JESSICA laughs) It's okay to say that. (MOLLY giggles) And we are going to hear more about her story, but before we get started, I thought it's important for us to really think through the idea that in San Antonio we hear a lot about snippets of information. It's like, "Hey, really cool stat from San Antonio." Or we've heard the one thing that's not so great about San Antonio, and in our book the way that The Story Goes is sort of set up is: how can we help tell the more complete story? (1:14) So, for example, The Story Goes in San Antonio that 35ish percent of our community has a college degree—that's an associate's degree or higher—which is pretty low actually, comparatively in the rest of the nation. Secondly to that, we also know that there's about 275,000 adults in our, in Bexar County, that have some college and no degree. And we also know, that an increase of just bachelor's degrees in our community of just 1%, which is about 15,000 bachelor's degree, could actually bring back to our community. What we would see in that return would be 1.4 billion dollars, 1% more Bachelor's degrees would get us 1.4 billion dollars in economic returns. Um, and I think we get that. I think, everybody, they just divvy it out, and it comes out to a check for everybody in San Antonio. All of us get it. 1.4 million people, 1.4 billion dollars. That's amazing. (2:17) Um, Jessica, we brought you in as like our first guest, 1. Because we basically are obsessed with your story (JESSICA giggles), but 2. I think there's something pretty telling about the way that you have figured out how to become one of the 35% of people. You were one of 275,000 adults with some college and no degree. That's a lot. That's a significant amount of human beings in our community. Um, and I want to just shine a light on 1. How an individual can take, can take control of where they want to go, but then 2. Really highlight some of the things and programs and organizations in San Antonio that help make it a lot easier, yeah? (3:06)

**JESSICA:** Yeah!

**MOLLY:** Cool, let's start first because we can, you're from San Antonio?

**JESSICA:** Yes!

**MOLLY:** Originally, born and raised?

**JESSICA:** Born and raised.



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**MOLLY:** Okay, it's required by law. Where did you graduate high school?

**JESSICA:** Business Careers High School at Holmes.

**MOLLY:** (upbeat) What! Okay!

**JESSICA:** (giggles) I'm a husky.

**MOLLY:** Business Careers, I like it. A husky. Um, my grandma taught at Holmes. That's where she retired, I mean years ago. You weren't there when she was there. I mean you could've been, I've been trying to figure out, I've been trying to say your age is like 75. (JESSICA laughs) It's never too late, y'all, to go back to college. Um, so you were born and raised here in San Antonio, tell me a little bit about your story. So, you graduated high school and immediately entered college? [\(3:49\)](#)

**JESSICA:** I immediately went to school. Um, my mom was remarried to my stepdad, and I had my little sister, and we are fourteen years apart. And so, my stepdad said, um, both my parents said, "If you are going to go to college, you can't go out of state. You need to get your associate's here at Alamo Colleges first." So I--

**MOLLY:** Which is not, that's normal--

**JESSICA:** Right.

**MOLLY:** We hear that all the time from parents [\(4:16\)](#)

**JESSICA:** So, I went to SAC, and I went to SAC for a whole year, um, did some classes. Of course, I'm eighteen and wanted to work and get my own money and do my own thing. So, I was working full time and going to school full time, and just didn't want to be home. So, I was doing that, but then that slipped on my classes, so I didn't get all my credits that first year. And then the second semester in the fall, they were recruiting—no sorry, in the second semester in the spring my freshman year—they were recruiting for Disney World. So they have this thing at UTSA, and I decided to go. They interview you on the spot, so it was really kind of crazy. And then, you get kind of, it's just for an internship, so you can't go unless you're in school. And so you go and you do this interview, and then two weeks later they'll tell you if you got in or not. [\(5:23\)](#)

**MOLLY:** This is an important point that I want to make sure we don't miss, was Mickey Mouse doing the interviews?

**JESSICA:** (laughs) No.



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**MOLLY:** (laughs) Could you imagine if he's like (mimics Mickey Mouse), "Ha, ha! Oh boy!" (BOTH laugh) That's my, thank you, you're welcome! That's my Mickey Mouse impression. So you go for this interview with Disney World, you're in school, and it's not going well cause you're like a freshman.

**JESSICA:** "I want to get out of here."

**MOLLY:** Yeah, right of course. You get it. You end up at Disney World, which is like, I mean that's not a horrible experience.

**JESSICA:** (overlapped) the best experience. (BOTH laugh) It's the happiest place on Earth, how could you be sad?

**MOLLY:** (laughing) Of course, it is. Wait, um, so you, you went from San Antonio to Florida, and you were living there?

**JESSICA:** Yes, and I went by myself. That was my first time flying.

**MOLLY:** Nineteen-year-old, I'm assuming? (6:10)

**JESSICA:** Yes, my first time flying, my first time away. My parents didn't approve, so I was going on my own. I was going, and yeah. I go for the fall semester, and I don't come back until January 4<sup>th</sup> is when my internship ends. So, I miss Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's, but it's the best experience. Going into working, I was working at Animal Kingdom, and I was working food and beverage. I wasn't working a big job or anything. It was the best experience. I met people from all over the world. I had a roommate from Wisconsin, a roommate from Arkansas, a roommate from Puerto Rico, and my coworkers were from Guatemala—all over the world. So it was, it was great to meet so many people. (7:04)

**MOLLY:** I can only imagine growing up in San Antonio, you've never flown on a plane. You're like, "Hey, this is where I live. I have to go to school here. My parents have told me I have to stay in San Antonio." And then you're like, "Bye! Going to Disney World!" (laughs)

**JESSICA:** Yes!

**MOLLY:** So, I'm sure it went over very well.

**JESSICA:** It did, of course. (BOTH laughing)

**MOLLY:** So, you come back in January and finish your degree?



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**JESSICA:** I came back in January thinking I could register, get my financial aid, everything will be good to go. I didn't worry about any of that during my internship.

**MOLLY:** Why would you, you're at Animal Kingdom? (BOTH laugh) Why would you care? (7:39)

**JESSICA:** So, when I came back, school started three days later. Of course, I wasn't registered for any of the classes, so the classes I needed were taken, and financial aid, and everything else. And so, I had to find a job because I was going to be out that semester. So, I got my first nonprofit job as an administrative assistant, and it was for kids with special needs and adoption agency.

**MOLLY:** Did you always think that you were going to go into the nonprofit sector? (8:12)

**JESSICA:** Never did I even think about it. I didn't even, I always thought like when I was at Business Careers, I loved accounting, and I wanted to be in the corporate world.

**MOLLY:** The fact that I love you so much, and we are both very different-- Accounting makes me want to actually die. (BOTH laughing) Like numbers, I can't. It hurts my head. (JESSICA laughs) I don't understand. Okay, so fast forward, 'cause you did not end up going back to school? (8:43)

**JESSICA:** Nope.

**MOLLY:** You just worked?

**JESSICA:** Well, I did go to school part-time, like throughout some of the semester, but not anything major.

**MOLLY:** Okay, so you're working in the nonprofit sector. You are a grown up now, living in your own place, I assume.

**JESSICA:** Right, yeah.

**MOLLY:** And then, what happens? (9:02)

**JESSICA:** I had just gotten a job at Clarity.

**MOLLY:** Clarity Child Guidance Center.

**JESSICA:** Yes.

**MOLLY:** That's where you work now. Tell, what's Clarity?



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**JESSICA:** It's a children's mental health hospital. It's not just a hospital. We handle in-patient, so if kids are a danger to themselves or others, they're able to stay at our hospital and have 24/7 care to get them stabilized. We have a partial hospital as well. And then we have out-patient, so they're able to go through the entire cycle, and we're able to help them gain the knowledge. [\(9:39\)](#)

**MOLLY:** It's super important organization, which we will highlight later. Uh, but I do, it's one in five kids struggle with mental illness.

**JESSICA:** Yeah.

**MOLLY:** And they grow up to be one in four adults, is that right?

**JESSICA:** Yes.

**MOLLY:** Okay, so you're at Clarity, super great organization, and you end up at the SA2020 luncheon last year.

**JESSICA:** Yeah, so two days after I had started--

**MOLLY:** (laughing) You were voluntold to participate. (JESSICA laughs)

**JESSICA:** Yes, so we did the registration, and then there was a table. We actually had a table. Um, so one of the things that was highlighted was the education piece and how only the 35% of people have their degree. I was the only one at my table who did not have a degree, and that kind of hit home for me. Um, and then there was something that you had mentioned, you said things like, "project upgrade," and it just kind of stuck in my head. What is project upgrade? So, I googled it that night when I got home, and it was like what is this program. What is it? So, I kept reading, and I sent an inquiry, and I heard from Michaela about two weeks later, and just kind of, we met and she gave me a whole rundown of different things. If you want to get your four-year degree, here's a couple of colleges. You know, I sent her my transcripts, sent her everything where she could look at what I had taken already, and what she thought I needed to advance. [\(11:16\)](#)

**MOLLY:** So, Upgrade, just so that we can kind of give an overview, Upgrade is part of a national initiative. It is called the Graduate Network. The Graduate Network sort of emphasizes four pillars of service, partnerships, messaging and sustainability. Basically, Upgrade is housed at the San Antonio Education Partnership, and specifically targets adults with some college, but no degree to help them get back in. So, I'm assuming right, that they've been helpful to you in this process? [\(11:41\)](#)



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**JESSICA:** Yes, very.

**MOLLY:** Where are you at in your college journey now?

**JESSICA:** So, I completed my first semester back in, and I did that full time.

**MOLLY:** Wait! You're working full-time, and you did that full-time?

**JESSICA:** And I did that full-time, and I have a five-year-old and a three-year-old.

**MOLLY:** What! What do you mean? Do you sleep ever? (BOTH laugh)

**JESSICA:** No, not really. (MOLLY laughs)

**MOLLY:** (JESSICA laughing) Sleep is for the weak.

**JESSICA:** And I'm in my second semester, doing full-time, this semester as well. [\(12:07\)](#)

**MOLLY:** Where are you going?

**JESSICA:** San Antonio College!

**MOLLY:** That's actually, so it's funny, I asked Michaela to just send over like some, hey who's doing what where? So, when they go through their client list, so the people actually going to Upgrade, the average person coming through Upgrade is about 39 years old. Um, 71% of the people that Upgrade serves are parents, so you fit in that demographic, apparently. And mostly women, 71% of the people who are going back and trying to figure out their college degree are women, which is also like shocking to me. It's all over the city which I also find really interesting. I was looking at their demographics, it's literally everywhere all over the city that we are seeing people come through to try to get back their degree. So, you have a five-year-old, a three-year-old, you're working full-time at Clarity, and you're going to school full-time at SAC, which is apparently where everyone is going. It's the number one school that we are seeing people reenroll in. [\(13:02\)](#)

**JESSICA:** They have a lot to offer there.

**MOLLY:** Do they really?

**JESSICA:** Yes.

**MOLLY:** It's also just, the Alamo Colleges District is just doing some really cool stuff. Now, they're talking about free tuition!



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**JESSICA:** Yeah! And the day of the luncheon, they offered free transportation for any student. That's pretty cool.

**MOLLY:** Yeah, it's student, faculty, and staff I think. If you have your ID, you can take VIA for free which is amazing. So, okay, you're second semester, what are you doing? Are you planning on getting your Associate's? [\(13:32\)](#)

**JESSICA:** So, I get my Associate's, um, I just have to do two classes in the summer, and once I do that I'll have my Associate's.

**MOLLY:** This summer?

**JESSICA:** This summer.

**MOLLY:** You'll have your Associate's?

**JESSICA:** I'll have my Associate's. (laughing) If they offer the classes I need.

**MOLLY:** Now, we need to make a plea. Please offer the classes Jessica needs at SAC this summer. Um, you immediately enter into the—you change percentage for us. In San Antonio, Texas, you immediately do it because you get your Associate's. Are you going on for your Bachelor's? [\(14:03\)](#)

**JESSICA:** I am.

**MOLLY:** What are you going to do?

**JESSICA:** I am doing Entrepreneurship because I do have a small business that I started last year--

**MOLLY:** What?!

**JESSICA:** But I've kind of put it a little on hold for friends and family because I'm going to school and working, so--

**MOLLY:** (jokingly) You can't keep your business going to? C'mon Jessica!

**JESSICA:** Well, I mean it's still there.

**MOLLY:** What do you do? What's your small business? [\(14:24\)](#)



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**JESSICA:** I just do, it's called Jaz Crafty Creations. It's like a little, we do like customized tumblers, we do customized t-shirts, just crafty stuff.

**MOLLY:** Oh okay, fun! So your plan is to get your degree in entrepreneurship, do you plan to do that business full-time?

**JESSICA:** Yes.

**MOLLY:** Okay, so basically, you're turning in your notice right now is what you're telling me to Clarity. (JESSICA laughs) I'm just kidding, we're kidding! *Just kidding*, everyone. So, that's where, had you always thought about being an entrepreneur?

**JESSICA:** No, I always thought I'd be an accountant for a firm. I really don't know what firm, but for a firm. [\(15:03\)](#)

**MOLLY:** When you were a kid, were you like, "Hey, I wanna be an accountant."? Obviously, that would have been so fun to play with you. I would've been like, "what are we doing?" and you're like, "we are playing CPA." (JESSICA laughs)

**JESSICA:** No, I don't think, I didn't learn, I didn't love accounting until my sophomore year of high school. After that, it was the struggle of trying to get the numbers to balance that once I balanced it-- made me the happiest person in the world.

**MOLLY:** Oh my god, I love that so much, okay. (JESSICA laughs)

**JESSICA:** So it was, actually, when I did the internship, I said I would be coming back and doing numbers for Disney World. That was going to be my dream.

**MOLLY:** You were going to do Donald Duck's taxes. (JESSICA laughs)

**JESSICA:** (laughing) Yes!

**MOLLY:** Got it. So, I guess my question onto you is, you are like the poster child for Upgrade, like "Hey, I saw, I don't want to be a person without a degree sitting at the table with people with degrees." You've gotten back in. I want to know a couple things. What is the struggle? What are you struggling with? Is it time? [\(16:05\)](#)

**JESSICA:** It is. Last year, or last semester, a lot of my classes I took most, they were all online classes. It was really good flexibility, but they were all do Sunday by midnight. So, on Sundays, one of my friends was really good about coming over and playing with the kids, so that I could just concentrate on that. Then we'd go have dinner or whatever, but that was really cool because I knew Sundays were my day to concentrate on school. This semester, it's a little bit



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difficult. I'm still working on how to manage. There are a couple classes due on Friday, a couple—well one class—that's due on Saturday, one class that's due on Sunday, so we are only three weeks into school, but last week was really cool where I was able to knock everything out on a Friday night. That was good. The kids were playing. I was able to do that, and we were good. So, it's just trying to figure out schedule and how it would work between kids and work and everything else. [\(17:09\)](#)

**MOLLY:** What about cost?

**JESSICA:** I was lucky enough that I qualified for a grant, the TPED grant is what it was called. Um, so I was able to do that. And then last semester, with Project Upgrade, if you're going back, they do offer a scholarship, and I was one of the scholarship recipients as well. [\(17:33\)](#)

**MOLLY:** What! That's awesome! Well, I was talking to Michaela before I came in, and I asked her, "Hey, what is a call to action for people?" One, she's like, "get in touch with us, we want to help you!" Two, she said it would be very helpful to have more scholarships. She said there aren't a lot of scholarships offered for adults who are going back to school. [\(17:52\)](#)

**JESSICA:** Yeah, there are a couple. I just missed the deadline, so I couldn't apply.

**MOLLY:** You had things to do, you were busy. (JESSICA laughs) You're busy!

**JESSICA:** But there are a couple that I've seen. Fastweb is really good about sending emails like, "hey, don't forget to apply for these scholarships." So, that was really helpful. Of course, you're not going to qualify for all of them because it is a nationwide one. Um, and Upgrade has a newsletter that comes out and says, "Hey, these are scholarships that are available, and these are the due dates," and "Don't forget tomorrow is the due date for this scholarship," whatever it is.

**MOLLY:** Right. Do you have advice for somebody who wants to go back? Like, all I'm thinking about is you work full time, you have a kid, two kids – five and three—that's not easy ages where they can take care of themselves. (MOLLY laughs) I mean I don't know I have dogs, right. (JESSICA laughs) Whatever, and then you are trying to go back and get your degree. I'm like—what's the advice? [\(18:48\)](#)

**JESSICA:** I would say don't give up. I think, it was really hard for me to get back in. There was hold after hold after hold, um, and this was what stopped me for about four years of going back is because there was holds.

**MOLLY:** And that's not unusual, right? Like I'm looking at the information that Michaela sent over. So many of the people who come through Upgrade have holds.



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**JESSICA:** Yes, so there's a hold because you, the last semester you were there you dropped all your classes, and there's no—your GPA is low or whatever it may be. Um, appealing all of the decisions, I had a hold on financial aid. They wouldn't give me anything, and it's just a matter of writing, "hey, you know what? I was young, and I just spent the money. Now, I'm older, and I really want my degree. So, please give me a second change and help me out." And it does take up time, so if you're wanting to apply or if you're wanting to get back into school, even if you're saying, "Oh, I'll do it in the fall. I'll do it now." They'll help you get through it. You'll be able to be ready by when the semester starts. Because if you start later, it's going to get harder, and that's what happened with me. Even though I started in January, um, in August I still had hold that I was still trying to-- I got dropped from all my classes the *day before* school was supposed to start. So, I went in there and just pleaded with them, "Please, my financial aid is coming next week. They're saying next week. Just let me—just help me out." So, go in there. Tell them your story, and let them know how you're doing. I mean, let them know where you're at. [\(20:32\)](#)

**MOLLY:** There's a lot of vulnerability that comes with that too. I mean, like just saying, "*I need help.*"

**JESSICA:** Yeah, yeah.

**MOLLY:** (continues) which is hard.

**JESSICA:** And it is very difficult for me to even take off of work and go. But SAC has, some days they're open until seven, and on Saturdays they're open until one. So, just depending.

**MOLLY:** Thank you so much for coming in and telling your story. The fact that you are one of the people that are *really* doing the thing, which I love. Um, thank you for helping us understand more about Upgrade and even Clarity, and knowing that you can get it done. You can do it. Um, that was Jessica. I'm Molly, and this of course, is The Story Goes. Everything you heard about today, Upgrade, Clarity, you can find on the KLRN website. [KLRN.org/thestorygoes](http://KLRN.org/thestorygoes). We did it! It's a pilot. We did it!

**JESSICA:** Yay! [\(21:26\)](#)

**MOLLY:** At some point, we will have a catchphrase. We don't have one now. It's just over. (BOTH laughing) And then, we are just done. So, thank you so much for listening. Thank you, thank you, thank you for being who you are.

**JESSICA:** Thank you!

**MOLLY:** You are one of the people who makes San Antonio great!

**JESSICA:** Thank you.



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**MOLLY:** (long break of silence, MOLLY whispers) That was the end. (21:48)



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