

From CMA to RN: Mariana Fuentes' Journey

For Mariana Fuentes, the dream of working in healthcare was always alive. But for a long time, it felt just out of reach. As a mother of two young children, the path to becoming a registered nurse seemed more overwhelming than inspiring. But that all changed the day she walked into Lee College.

"I visited Lee College for information on the Nursing Program," Mariana recalls. "I always wanted to go for an RN degree, but I realized it just wasn't the right time for me and my family."

That moment could have been the end of her healthcare journey. Instead, it was just the beginning.

A Flexible First Step

While exploring her options, Mariana learned about the Clinical Medical Assistant (CMA) classes offered in the evenings through the Lee College Cross Credit Healthcare Program. For a mother juggling parenthood and education, this was a life-changing moment.

"To me, the fact that the class schedule was flexible was key," she says. "I didn't have to worry about childcare, which made it very doable for my family."

Mariana enrolled and quickly found her rhythm. The nighttime classes allowed her to study while her husband cared for their children. The short, focused timeline of the program made it ideal for her family's needs. In July 2019, she completed the program. Before she even graduated, she was offered a job at her clinical site, the Women's Healthcare Center of Baytown.

Building Confidence and Knowledge

Her time in the CMA program laid a strong foundation. Mariana credits the supportive environment and dedicated instructors for helping her thrive.

"The program was great," she says. "It helped a lot. I didn't feel lost when I stepped into clinicals. I felt comfortable."

She also found mentors among the nursing faculty; people who advocated for her, guided her, and even helped her land interviews for future opportunities.

"I loved my job as a CMA," Mariana explains, "but I knew I could do more."

Chasing a Bigger Dream

Encouraged by her success and eager to grow, Mariana decided it was finally time to pursue her original goal: becoming a registered nurse. She spent a year completing prerequisites before diving into two years of nursing school.

In May, Mariana graduated summa cum laude, earning her Associate Degree in Nursing and receiving the Presidential Honors Award in Nursing — a testament to her hard work, perseverance, and academic excellence.

But she isn't stopping there.

A Future in the ICU

In July, Mariana will begin a residency program at Houston Methodist Hospital in Baytown, a position she secured with the support of the same instructors who had once encouraged her. The year-long residency will prepare her for advanced practice as an RN2, and she already has her sights set on earning her bachelor's degree in nursing next.

Her vision has evolved as she's grown. Initially drawn to labor and delivery, her clinical experience opened a new door: the intensive care unit.

"I loved my clinicals in the ICU," she says. "I've always looked up to ICU nurses. They're so knowledgeable. It's life-or-death situations. You get fewer patients, but the level of care is intense. I felt drawn to it."

Paying It Forward

Mariana's journey didn't just transform her life, it inspired those around her, too. She encouraged her sister to enroll in the CMA program, and now she's paying it forward by sharing her story.

"If you're interested in healthcare but not sure where to start, go through the CMA program," she advises. "You'll get your certification quickly. And if you want to take it further, it'll help you feel familiar with medical terminology, processes — everything. I would do it again. My success in nursing was due to my experience in the CMA program."

The Lee College Difference

Lee College's Cross-Credit Healthcare Programs empower students to create personalized educational pathways that align with their unique goals, supported by individualized guidance every step of the way.

The Clinical Medical Assistant program is a 184-hour program that prepares students to work in doctors' offices, chiropractic clinics, optometry practices, and more. It includes 136 hours of classroom instruction and a 48-hour clinical externship.

Program Manager Tainisha Arvie explains, "Our model ensures that every student's experience matters — whether they're beginning with a certificate or working toward advanced allied health or nursing programs. We adapt to each student's timeline, goals, and learning style to help them succeed."

This flexible and student-centered approach reflects the college's commitment to making healthcare education accessible and meaningful for all learners.

A Story of Strength and Determination

Mariana Fuentes proves that even when the timing isn't perfect, passion and perseverance can still carry you forward. From navigating motherhood to excelling in healthcare, her story is one of strength, adaptability, and never letting go of a dream no matter how long it takes to reach it.

Ready to take the first step toward your healthcare career? Registration for the Lee College Cross Credit Healthcare Program is now open. Designed with flexibility in mind, these programs offer convenient scheduling and fast-track pathways to certification in high-demand fields such as Clinical Medical Assistant, Dental Assistant, EKG Technician, and Phlebotomy Technician.

To find out more and begin your journey today, email cchealthcare@lee.edu or call 281.429.6229.