

Story and photo

By Sgt. 1st Class Todd Oliver, SETAF Public Affairs

At the risk of an Equal Opportunity or Inspector General's complaint—she's a cute girl. Her long black hair is neatly pinned up behind her head. She's short, no more than five feet or so. Her complexion and her deep brown eyes give away her Hispanic heritage before she says a word.

Once she does speak however, all doubt is removed.

Hailing from Cali, in Colombia, Spc. Linda Sandoval is like many other soldiers serving in the United States Army and in the 173rd Airborne Brigade today. Some joined the army to serve the country they've come to love, others for the educational benefits, some do it to become citizens, and still others from a sense of duty. None of those reasons could be considered all that different from the reason many of us join, but what sets Sandoval apart from them is something else entirely.

While the proper term of address in the military might be specialist, on the outside for her it's doctor. Linda Sandoval, Ph.D.

She possesses a gift for gab and tells a story of stark contrasts--poverty and affluence, debt and reward.

"Growing up in Colombia we were raised very strictly," she said explaining strong family ties and a strict catholic upbringing in a middleclass neighborhood in Columbia. "When we grew up in Columbia we were very close, everything was about family. We would always eat together; we would always do things together. Even if the parents worked, every day, you still had that time, that quality time."

It's very obvious, even within the first few moments of talking to Sandoval, that her mother played an essential, pivotal role in her life and in the life of her family.

When Sandoval was 7, the family was about to include on less individual and was about to make one little girl do a lot of growing up.

"My father was in the Air Force, a pilot," she said. "He was a lieutenant when they met. They got married and eventually separated. I was seven years old at the time."

"I grew up I think, before I was supposed to grow up, mentally I matured very young," she said.

With three younger siblings to take care of, while her mother re-entered the work force, growing up was not an option it was a requirement.

"I had a lot of responsibility put on me," she said. "I remember having to cook and clean the house and I didn't think anything about it. I cooked with a gas stove, and sometimes when I tell people that they ask me 'how could you, you were only seven years old?' It doesn't seem right, but it was, it was pushed by the situation."

Sandoval wasn't beyond being a normal kid though, and being seven sometimes the temptation to play and put off chores was too much.

"My sister and I used to have to do the laundry every few days, and we did it by hand like we do it here," she said referring to the practice of most GI's in theater of doing laundry in a bucket by hand. "With the five of us it was a chore we had to do every three day or so.

"Sometimes, okay a lot of time, my sister and I would put the laundry in the tub to soak it and then, being kids, start to play. We'd leave it there until it started to get dark. Knowing that mom would be home soon, we would run and just hang it up, still soaking, on the line really fast. But she normally caught us doing that," she said grinning ear to ear and laughing as if remembering a fond moment.

She's careful though not to characterize the situation as rough. The overused, 'difficult childhood' term doesn't apply.

"At the time, because of the situation, it never seemed that way. Looking back on it, sure I can say it was rough but I would never change it, nothing, not any part of it. It gave me my maturity, my responsibility and appreciation for family values, I wouldn't want to change that."

Sandoval and her family would eventually make it to the United States by way of Florida. Her mother, entering the country the way many immigrants do, illegally, went first to pave the way for her children. Sandoval was just 18.

"No matter how much you work in Columbia, you never seem to make it," she said. "You can work and work and work but if you have four kids and they all want to go to college, it's impossible, they won't be able too."

So off her mother went, seeking a better life for her children than the streets of Cali could offer.

“My mom came first, she opened the doors for us. She didn’t want us to come immediately; she came illegally but later became a citizen. I don’t even know how she did it, I know she had to pay a lot and had a very hard time.”

“I didn’t really want to come to the States . . . the fear of changing, and of course I was very nervous. I was established with friends and I didn’t want to go.”

But come they did leaving everything behind but a suitcase of clothes. No furniture, no keepsakes, no family photos no anything. With little more than the clothes on their backs, they set off for America.

“She wanted everything to be new she said, she said she wanted us to have a new life,” Sandoval said.

“From the moment we arrived at the airport in Miami we were like, ‘wow’. It took a few months to get used to it. Being in Miami was like being in another world,” she said.

It might as well have been another world—another world with a different language.

“We took longer to learn the language, it kind of messed us up a bit living in Miami (referring to the fact that it’s a city where Spanish, while not the official language, is commonly spoken). If we had gone north we would have had less of an accent.”

But they took English lessons and, little by little, the family picked up the language.

“She [our mother] pushed us to learn the language,” Sandoval said. “It was something she always pushed us to do. In order to get ahead you have to speak the language.”

When she left Colombia she was in her second year of medical school. What America considers high school ends for most Columbian students at the age of 15.

“They didn’t believe that I had already studied at a university and that at the age of 18 I could have almost two years of medical school,” she explained. A test, in English was administered, and again, due to a lack of language skills she was forced to attend six months of high school.

“In my country it’s very strict, you never disrespect your teachers, and in fact the teachers actually become sort of like your second parents. They used to have the right to hit you. While we feared our teachers, we also respected them. If I even looked back at my teachers I would not only get hit by them, but also my mother would hit me. When I came here I saw how uncaring students were and how the books were free and how students disrespected their teachers,” she said.

As time progressed though she adapted, learned the language and eventually went on to higher education earning a Doctorate in Physiology from Florida Memorial College.

As she entered the business world, she had accrued an amount of debt nearing the \$100,000 mark. Though she was making a very good living there were bills which, atop the student loans, added up. Cars, phones, rent, food all cost money and, while not overwhelming, were a terrific burden, she said.

“I never looked to go to college to be rich, I just wanted to be comfortable. I thought if I went to college I would have enough money to pay my bills. When I entered the field though I wasn’t making much money. My bills started to balloon and I didn’t have enough to pay them all, I was stuck.”

In stepped the Army.

Although she was not a citizen, the Army recruiters thought they could help. But the very lack of citizenship would add some odd kinks to the situation.

Instead of being able to apply her civilian education to her army career, she found herself severely limited in her choice of military specialties, and a commissioning was out of the question.

“They told me they could pay \$65,000 of my student loans and they can help me become a citizen,” she said. “It was a big cut in pay, but at the same time I didn’t have to pay for a place to live and I could return my leased car. I thought about it, I thought about it for a year.

“The hardest thing was leaving my mom,” she said. “I had thought of joining the military before, but never pursued it because I didn’t want to leave her. I couldn’t face the thought of leaving my mom, of moving away from her. But she told me, you know one day I will be gone and you will regret not going.”

So off she went.

They told me I could be a cook but that wasn’t something I wanted to do,” she explained. “A lot of closed doors were closed to me because I was not a citizen.”

So she enlisted as a supply specialist, became a paratrooper and came to the 173d Airborne Brigade. One year later, she finds herself in Iraq with the Sky Soldiers.

Shortly before coming to Iraq, Sandoval's mother passed away. It's an event that still weighs heavy on her mind.

"She would have worried about me, during advanced individual training she sent me packages every week. I can't imagine what she would have done here, I would have more packages than anyone could ever need," she said with a grin.