

PROGRAM: Orleans Technical College

DATE RUN: May 2, 2022

SOURCE URL: <https://www.aldianews.com/leadership/entrepreneurs/finding-purpose-together>

---



By Nigel Thompson, AL DÍA

For 16 years, Mercedes Lopez was a medical assistant at a hospital in Philadelphia. Today, she's an apprentice electrician.

The story of Lopez's career shift starts with her son Jeremy. After graduating from Abraham Lincoln High School in 2020 amid the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, he picked up part-time maintenance work with his dad, but he wanted more for himself.

To do that, he decided to go back to trade school at Orleans Technical College, operated by JEVS Human Services, where he took up building maintenance.

"I really wanted to make something of myself," Jeremy told AL DÍA in a recent interview. "I'm young and there's plenty of opportunity. I saw this opportunity and I took it."

The Building Maintenance program at Orleans is a six or 13-month curriculum that allows students to touch every aspect of property maintenance, from carpentry and electrical, to HVAC, appliance repair and more.

Beyond the career, it was also a chance for Jeremy to learn skills not many people know. Lopez was the one to help him sign up for classes, and on the day they went in-person to do it, she had an epiphany of her own as a leader talked about the programs at the school.

"The way she hyped up everything, I was like: 'You know what? I don't even like my job anymore. I've climbed the ladder, I've done everything. I've been there doing this for the past 16 years. I just got tired of it,'" said Lopez.

Not long after that first sign-up day, she signed herself up for carpentry, and then the electrician's training course at Orleans. Like building maintenance, it is a six or 13-month course that gets students up to speed doing electrical work in any residential or commercial establishment.

Lopez described her new line of work as a “puzzle.” A fan of puzzles, she looked at every facet of the electrician’s process from mapping out a system, solving a problem in that system and how much wire to use to complete the system.

She says she’s still learning, but the sense of accomplishment is far beyond anything at her previous job.

“I like it because it keeps me busy and it makes me feel good after seeing I did this,” said Lopez. “It has its challenges, but I come home much, much happier.”

When she started her program in August 2021, Jeremy had already been enrolled for two months, and their programs took place in workshops on opposing sides of the same hallway at Orleans.

They started going to school together, helping each other out with various aspects of their respective programs, and thinking about the future.

The car rides to and from Orleans, beyond a time for music duels over the aux cord, were also reserved for Mercedes and Jeremy to talk about what they wanted to do in their new professional lanes.

“I think it brought us closer together,” she said. “We talked a lot more about the trade and what we're gonna do in the future with it.”

These days, both are fresh graduates from Orleans, but the ideas brainstormed while still students are alive and well.