

PhD grad chased her dreams while navigating family and work

By Amanda Goodman, ASU News
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Editor's note: This story is part of a series of profiles of notable [fall 2025 graduates](#).

A former public school teacher, Mariana Silva has always had a passion for helping kids, especially bilingual children who have or are at risk for a developmental language disorder.

So when she decided to pursue a PhD through the [College of Health Solutions](#) at Arizona State University, Silva realized she was the one who was going to need support. Originally from Bogota, Colombia, and a solo parent of two, she moved to Arizona on her own after living in New York City. When she arrived here, she had no family and no friends, so she got to work building community.

"I was fortunate to meet people whom I could trust: my neighbor Linda, who picked up my sons when I had a late class or an event; my oldest son's friend's mother, who opened her home when I traveled for conferences; and a close friend/babysitter who lived with us for a few months each year during the most intense periods of my PhD," Silva said.

Admittedly, she says there was no balance as she was taking care of her boys, working and pursuing a doctoral degree. But when she let go of trying to be the perfect mother and the perfect student, she was able to go with the flow, and everyone benefited.

"Assignments were sometimes rushed and had to be redone. Child care plans sometimes fell apart. I learned to be gentle with myself and to accept that doing my best was enough," she said.

This December, Silva will earn a [PhD in speech and hearing science](#) with a concentration in auditory and language neuroscience. Her years' worth of hard work and dedication have paid off not only professionally but personally as well. Her boys are healthy, happy and thriving.

She plans to use her degree to continue working with bilingual children and conducting research that can "directly improve their communication, either orally, in writing, or by alternative or augmentative communication."

Silva is transparent about the process of getting to this point being messy; challenges persisted throughout, but she said that wasn't a deterrent for her, and it shouldn't be for other parents.

"You don't have to do it perfectly. Ask for help. You deserve support, and your goals in life matter."

Below, she shares insight about her experience and advice for fellow students.

Question: What was your “aha” moment when you realized you wanted to study the field you majored in?

Answer: I enjoy working with children, especially children who need a little bit more help than others. As a former public school teacher, I saw firsthand how many children, especially those who needed just a bit more support, struggled to learn to read and write. That experience stayed with me. I've always loved working with children, especially those who benefit from individualized approaches. That drive led me to speech-language pathology and, eventually, to my research on word learning and vocabulary.

Q: What's something you learned while at ASU — in the classroom or otherwise — that surprised you or changed your perspective?

A: That most things in research and in life are not binary. There is nuance, complexity and a lot of gray area. The more I learned, the more I realized how many assumptions I had to let go of. Every answer leads to more questions, and many of those questions are not simple to answer.

Q: Why did you choose ASU?

A: I chose ASU because of [its charter](#), its commitment to the community, and the PhD grant that made my training possible. I also felt aligned with the research community here and the mentorship I knew I would receive.

Q: What's the best piece of advice you'd give to those still in school?

A: It's worth it. And if you're having a hard time, ask for support — you're not meant to do everything alone. Also, stay open to seeing things in new ways. The higher you go in school, the more opportunities you have to analyze, question and develop critical thinking. We all have that ability, but graduate school gives you the space and structure to strengthen it.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Mariana Silva is capping off years of hard work and determination with a PhD in speech and hearing science.