

Former Girl Scout takes public service from cookie sales to public defense

School of Criminology and Criminal Justice graduate has eyes set on master's degree, law school

By Ayrel Clark-Proffitt, ASU News
April 28, 2026

Editor's note: This story is part of a series of profiles of notable [spring 2026 graduates](#).

By Marielle Rua

Crystal Arianna Estrada joined her local Girl Scouts troop because her parents wanted positive influences in her life. Living in a low-income neighborhood in Fontana, California, negative influences were everywhere, she said.

She did what every Girl Scout did: sold cookies, made special deliveries to the police and fire departments and volunteered her time at the soup kitchen. But Estrada, the Spring 2026 Outstanding Graduate from the [School of Criminology and Criminal Justice](#), part of ASU's [Watts College of Public Service and Community Solutions](#), could still see the cracks in her community.

“Growing up in a low-income neighborhood, I witnessed many people turn to crime as a way to provide for their families,” she said. “I also saw individuals who struggled to defend themselves simply because they did not understand the criminal justice system.”

She witnessed the same struggles even after moving to a better neighborhood. Estrada started a club in high school, hosting cleanups in different cities and feeding unhoused individuals, hoping to offer support.

When she moved to Arizona, her passion for public service continued. Estrada decided to pursue a degree in criminology and criminal justice. She chose Arizona State University's West Valley campus because of the welcoming environment and because she wanted to stay close to family.

“(My family) have helped me in so many ways to achieve what I have,” Estrada said. “It's not them taking the test, writing these papers or doing the interview, but it's them behind the scenes helping me. Especially my mom, who has always pushed me to do more and believe in myself.”

Even with her support system, being a first-generation college student was difficult. Estrada said it was overwhelming, needing assistance from family to apply for scholarships. She received the [Decker Family Scholarship](#), which she describes as transformative for the financial pressure it relieved. She also received the [Accelerated Master's Award](#) and the [Pat Manion Scholarship](#) for her accelerated master's degree.

Estrada will cross the stage in May with her bachelor's degree in criminology and criminal justice and a minor in communication, something she hopes will help her become a better public defender. Her future plans include a master's degree in public administration and law school.

“Continuing my education is important to me because it allows me to keep building the knowledge and skills I need to make a meaningful impact in my community. My goal is to advocate for individuals from underserved and low-income communities to help ensure they have fair representation within the criminal justice system.”

Read on to learn more about Estrada's ASU journey:

Note: Answers have been edited for length and clarity.

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

Answer: In my junior year at ASU, I took CRD 435: Service Learning for Community Development, a course that required students to find a cause they were passionate about. I chose homelessness, a topic close to my heart. I decided to work with Keys to Change, a nonprofit supporting individuals experiencing homelessness and those impacted by incarceration and addiction. This experience not only allowed me to help individuals directly but also strengthened my leadership, problem-solving and communication skills. It reinforced my passion for criminal justice and my commitment to supporting underserved communities, shaping the way I hope to lead and make an impact in my future career.

Q: Which professor taught you the most important lesson while at ASU?

A: It's honestly hard to choose just one because I've had so many great professors, but professors [Jesse Weins](#), [Bethney Michaels](#) and [Krystlelynn Caraballo](#) really stood out to me. They pushed me academically while also helping me grow personally. They taught me that there's no limit to what I can achieve and showed me the value of hard work, both inside and outside the classroom.

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

A: Speak up and ask questions. Building connections is so important. A lot of students graduate without experience because they're afraid to ask for opportunities or help. There are so many people willing to support you, but you have to take that first step.

Q: If someone gave you \$40 million to solve one problem on our planet, what would you tackle?

A: I am most passionate about helping the unhoused population. I feel like no one should have to go to sleep at night without a bed or a roof over their head. It is a basic necessity, and I would want to use the money to fund shelters and food banks. I have volunteered with many organizations that support and help this community, and funding could help expand their services to more people and help them get out of their situations.

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

Main image



School of Criminology and Criminal Justice Outstanding Graduate Crystal Arianna Estrada plans to become a public defender. Courtesy photo