

Legend of Wilma

It's a life full of triumph, surprise

By TIM CARVELL
SPECIAL WRITER

Everybody had the same reaction to the news that Wilma Garcia is the subject of a profile: "Oh, how wonderful!"

Receptionists, fellow professors, friends: All said, "Oh, how wonderful!" Everybody.

Everybody, that is, except for Wilma Garcia. "My kids," she said, "call this crap the legend of St. Wilma."

Still, Garcia's story reads like a legend, or, at the very least, a pretty decent TV movie. A welfare mother who graduated from Oakland University, Garcia became a highly respected associate professor of rhetoric at her alma mater and will speak at neighboring Oakland Community College's commencement ceremonies June 5.

If past record is any indication, the speech should be anything but dull.

Garcia does not have the commencement speech written yet, so far, she has a few ideas and a title: "What We Learned at OCC."

What I learned

"I had a speech teacher who taught me not to write it down. She said, 'Know what you're going to say first, and what you're going to say last, and have a general idea of what you're going to say in the middle.' It won't be long. If a graduation speech goes on more than 10 minutes, you're a nerd," Garcia said.

The speech, however brief, gives her a chance to make up for missing her own graduation 19 years ago. Garcia, then 30, said she was afraid she would be out of place among graduates half her age.

"I didn't think graduation mattered. I thought it was for the kids. I've been sorry ever since," Garcia said.

Garcia entered college at age 35, after her husband left her with eight children. She supported herself and her children with State Aid to Dependent Children payments throughout her undergraduate career, while the children watched out for each other.

"People ask me how I got through college with eight kids, but they forget that, while the youngest was

four, the oldest was 17. I don't think I could have done it without eight kids," Garcia said.

Going to college, Garcia said, changed her life. "I found out I liked studying more than I liked doing the laundry."

The experience gives her a perspective on the women's movement.

"I teach women's studies, and younger students say, 'Wow, it was really awful back then. Are we glad that's over?' It's hard to explain to them that I married out of high school in 1950. I was the 20th woman in my class to get married," Garcia said. "In those days, we were supposed to marry and have as many children as possible and stay home. For a while in the 1970s, you weren't supposed to have kids. Now, you're supposed to have kids again, but you're also expected to work full time and keep a clean house."

Now, she has some practical advice for those considering raising a family.

"Don't have children," she said.

"Have grandchildren. They go home." She has 16 grandchildren so far.

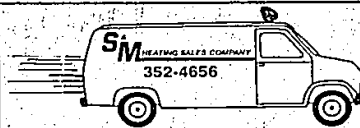
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Wilma Garcia
Oakland University professor

Garcia said she is a case lesson in the effectiveness of the ADC program, a lesson she doesn't feel Governor John Engler is learning.

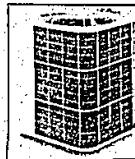
"I hope John Engler isn't around long enough that people will even remember his name," she said. "When I started at OCC, I was an ADC, and I'm sure glad I was an ADC then rather than now. I hope

See WILMA, 7A



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