

# JESSICA JIMENEZ

RECIPIENT OF THE 2024-25 CGA EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION  
\$10,000 LEGENDS OF THE INDUSTRY SCHOLARSHIP

## A LOVE OF LEARNING FUELS JESSICA JIMENEZ'S GROWTH IN GROCERY INDUSTRY

By Dorsey Griffith

It's not often that a part-time, after-school bagger job at a grocery store inspires a lifelong love for the industry. But that's exactly what happened with Jessica Jimenez, assistant store manager at Gelson's Markets in Silverlake, Los Angeles.

It didn't hurt that her mother, Cheryl, has worked for Gelson's for nearly 35 years. By now, working for Gelson's is more like a family tradition.

For her dedication and drive to keep learning and growing in her profession, Jessica is this year's recipient of the California Grocers Association Education Foundation's (CGAEF) Legends of the Industry Scholarship, a \$10,000 award for college tuition.

Jessica's immediate plan is to achieve two additional associate's degrees—one in business administration with an emphasis on accounting and one in economics, both of which she intends to complete in 2025.

### A COLLEGE CAREER INTERRUPTED

Jessica's long path to college began when she was an 18-year-old bagger at Gelson's in Northridge. She began at College of the Canyons, a community college in Santa Clarita, studying psychology. That ended when she became pregnant with her first child, Colin, and she decided to focus instead on raising him.

After Colin was born, Jessica moved to Reno, Nevada, and took a job as a supervisor for Levy Restaurants. She ran bar and other concessions during major stadium events like rodeos and baseball games. She excelled in the role, which grew in responsibilities over time, and stayed with the company for nine years. During that time, she had a second child, Mason, who is now 11.

Just before the COVID-19 pandemic struck and lockdowns shuttered most businesses in 2020, Jessica, a single parent, moved back to Los Angeles, where she found her way back to her mother, father, and sisters—and to Gelson's. Jessica and her kids live with her parents in Burbank.

"It was scary, because I didn't know exactly what I was going to do," she said. "I took a job as a clerk at Gelson's. They really needed people. Six months into it, they made me an assistant store manager. Everything was rough, but I stayed with it."

Adam Salgado, Chief Marketing Officer at Heritage Grocers Group, is Vice Chair of the CGA Educational Foundation, and was among those Trustees who reviewed the Legends of the Industry finalists.

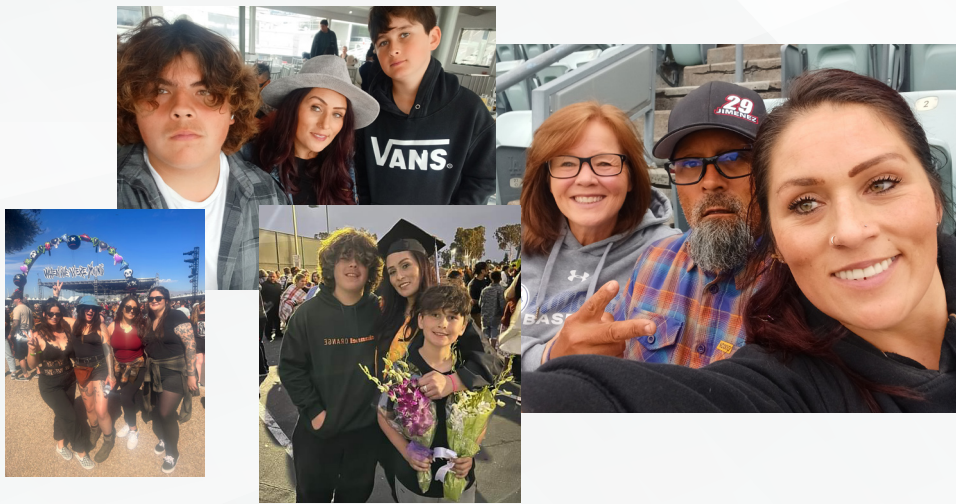
"I was struck by how driven Jessica is," he said. "She has faced her share of adversity and challenges, but she is a fighter and didn't give up. I am also a big

fan of success stories, and there is definitely a 'success story' in the making with Jessica."

In 2022, Jessica, with encouragement from Gelson's management, took advantage of a program offered by CGAEF, which reimburses employees for their tuition and book expenses for college courses that are part of the Retail Management Certificate Program. With that under her belt, she continued her college career by completing two additional semesters at Cerritos College. This year, she completed her first of three associate's degrees in business management.

"Classes were 100% online, and there were a lot of long days and long nights," she said. "I work 6 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. and do my schoolwork after work and on my days off, but I juggle that with football practice for my older son and soccer practice for my younger son."





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Fortunately, she said, her parents provide a great support system, which lets her focus on her ever-expanding management duties with Gelson’s and being a good role model for her boys.

## GROWING WITH GELSON’S

Today, Jessica oversees store operations — everything from payroll to managing customer complaints and staff scheduling to store displays. What’s the hardest part of her job? “Keeping customers happy,” she said. “We are all about customer satisfaction and making sure everyone leaves happier than when they came in.” That can be difficult, she acknowledged, with occasional product shortages that can inconvenience loyal customers.

When a customer isn’t satisfied, Jessica has a solution. “There is always a way to make the customer happy, whether it’s a \$5 gift card or a replacement item. I’ve learned a lot of people skills, how to read people’s emotions and counteract them with kindness. People want you to listen. As long as you listen, empathize with them, and offer a solution if there is one, they are happy.”

Jessica also has had to adapt to new corporate management; Gelson’s was purchased by Pan Pacific International Holdings, a Japanese company, in 2021, and with the new ownership came new store operations.

“It will take adjusting and tailoring operations to specific needs,” she said. “We have a lot of longtime employees who want to do what they have always done. In the process, I’ve learned to always be open to change.”

Over time, Jessica has grown to love coming to work each day, embracing challenges and appreciating that no single day is like another.

“I’ve moved up in the business quickly because I am an employee who will do it,” she said. “I want to know what to do, why we need to do it, and all the parts that go into doing it. It’s well-rounded. I get to do a little bit of everything, so I never get bored. I don’t like being stagnant.”

Standing behind her growth as a manager are her mother, Cheryl, now a corporate employee on the merchandising team who taught her how to work hard, and her store director, Jose Salmeron.

“He taught me everything I know—one of the few I ever had who got me prepared for the next step versus throwing me into the next step,” she said.

## NEXT STEPS

Beyond getting her kids off to school, prepping their sports uniforms, discussing college options with Colin and figuring out what to pick up for dinner when it’s her turn to feed the multi-generational family, Jessica is looking forward to continuing her education so she can be an even more effective leader for her company and her team of employees.

She’s eager to learn more about marketing—both through social media and in-store promotions—and hopes to better understand supply chain management, its role in the grocery industry, and her own professional development.

And while a bachelor’s degree in accounting is her ultimate educational goal, she’s eager to take on the WAFC’s Food Industry Management program at USC to learn from the industry’s top educational professionals.

“I love to learn,” said Jessica. “The farther I go, the more I can branch out into all the aspects of the business.”

Assessing her potential, Salgado points to Jessica’s last sentence in her application essay: “Ultimately, my pursuit of a business degree is not merely about acquiring a credential but rather about embarking on a transformative journey of personal and professional growth.”

Said Salgado: “I have a feeling this is not the last we will hear about Jessica. I look forward to watching from the sidelines as she continues growing in retail.” ■