Aulis Martinez is high school graduate.

Bright red graduate hats dangle from the ceiling.

Silver balloon letters taped to the wall spell “Aulis.”

Family and friends gathered around tables in the back room of Azteca Restaurant in Gothenburg last Saturday night to celebrate the high school graduation of Aulis Martinez.

For Aulis—who lives in Gothenburg—and her immediate and extended family, receiving a diploma from Cozad High School means more than to most other graduates.

Not only is dark-haired, soft-spoken Aulis the first to graduate in her family but the first in her extended family as well.

Her parents Jose and Alicia Reyna, who operate Azteca, didn’t graduate from high school nor did their siblings or parents.

“I’m very excited,” Aulis said.

Both her parents were born in Mexico—Jose in Monterrey and Alicia in Durango.

Alicia was 2 when her family traveled to Chicago, IL, where she became a U.S. citizen in 1997. Jose moved to the United States as an adult.

AULIS MARTINEZ

Parents: Jose and Alicia Reyna

Post graduate plans: Attend college, hopefully Harvard University in 2011.

Favorite food: Lobster, any kind of seafood.

Favorite subjects: Math and English.

Hobbies, interests: Dancing, drawing, reading, writing; being by myself and hanging out with friends.

Best high school memory: When the senior class visited Camp Comeca and my friends and I got lost in the trees.

Best advice parents gave you: Don't ever let anyone put you down. Do what you want to do.

The couple met in Iowa.

Aulis said she grew up hearing about the importance of a high school diploma from her mother.

“She said it’s not always about working for money which is what she did,” Aulis explained. “She also said that whatever I want in this life takes time and that I need to work at it.”

Everyday Aulis described her mother as “on my case” to do schoolwork well.

An honor roll student, Aulis said getting good grades wasn’t that easy especially when the family moved around so much.

She was born in Iowa before moving to Chicago, IL, and then to Cambridge, Fremont and Lexington.

Before her senior year, the family moved to Cozad and started leasing a restaurant in Gothenburg where they moved near the end of 2009.

But relocation has not been the biggest challenge.

Coming to terms with the death of her 8-year-old brother Michael in a car accident in March has been a struggle.

“Nothing has been more difficult than that,” Aulis said.

With diploma in hand, what does she want to do?

“Become a lawyer,” her mother answered. “Go to Harvard.”

Although Aulis has applied for scholarships, she said she’s missed the deadline for application this year to the Ivy League school.

Short-term plans include working at the restaurant this summer, getting into another college this fall and applying to Harvard next year.

Alicia said she and her daughter watched Homeless to Harvard: The Liz Murray Story, a movie about a a homeless woman without a bright future who did whatever she could to get out of her situation.

“She made it to Harvard and I know that Aulis can,” Alicia said. “If it’s the last thing I do, she’ll go to college.”

Aulis said she wants to prove to her biological father that she has what it takes to become an attorney.

“I told him what I wanted to do and he said you had to be really smart and then he smirked,” she said.

Much of the reason Alicia has hounded her daughter to succeed in school is because she was a unwed mother at age 18.

“I could have done a lot more things if I hadn’t gotten pregnant,” she said.

After Aulis leaves the nest, son Eddie, 15, is next.

“I want him to go,” Alicia said. “All my children know they have to work hard and get good grades to get into a good college.”

Once she goes to college, Aulis said she’ll miss her friends, family and knowing that “Mom’s not going to be there paying for all my stuff.”

Alicia, with tears welling in her eyes, said she’s proud of her daughter.

“I’m so glad she’s made it. I hope she becomes what she wants to become and has a happy life.”

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