

ASSOCIATE  
PROFESSOR DUSYA  
VERA SAYS SHE  
HAS LEARNED THE  
GREATEST LESSONS  
IN LIFE FROM  
HER CHILDREN —  
(FROM LEFT)  
DUSYA, LIAM  
AND TONY.



# Infinite Possibility

## MANAGEMENT PROFESSOR SHARES PERSPECTIVE ON MOTHERHOOD AND CAREER

*Story by Jessica Navarro, Photos by Nicki Evans*

**D**usya Vera is a flurry of motion. In conversation, she speaks with her hands, often leaning forward to nod or ask a question. Vera's life, too, is one of constant movement — she is a mother of triplets, and she works full-time as an associate professor of management at Bauer College, producing academic research and teaching graduate-level courses.

“Of course I have felt overwhelmed many times, and I still do sometimes,” Vera said. “But the problem with feeling overwhelmed is that we are judging ourselves. So, one thing I repeat to myself is, ‘I am doing the best I can.’”

Vera has been on-the-go since she was a little girl, growing up in Guayaquil, Ecuador, as the oldest of four siblings. Her parents enrolled their children in a range of lessons and classes — ballet, English, karate, art, piano.

“I loved it,” she said. “It was such a rich experience, and I have a lot of happy memories.”

Even with the opportunity to study in a range of areas, Vera didn’t have a set career trajectory. Although her parents both had doctoral degrees — a rarity in Ecuador at that time — and taught part-time at the university, being a professor wasn’t Vera’s immediate plan.

“I went through a period where I had no idea what I was going to be,” she said. “I had education in my family and grew up in an environment of educators, but I didn’t really know. I was a little lost for a while.”

She earned a bachelor’s degree in computer engineering from the Polytechnic University of Guayaquil before receiving an MBA from the University of Pittsburgh. With her graduate degree, Vera came back to Guayaquil in the mid-90s to serve as the IT director of the city’s burgeoning stock exchange.

“It was this tiny little thing, starting to grow,” she said. “Nobody really knew what a stock was, so a lot of the job was educating the public and the firms about the stock market.”

Although Vera didn’t have the formal title of “educator,” her innate love of teaching remained strong. She taught part-time as an adjunct professor in the evenings and on the weekends, before an experience at a Guayaquil executive management institute convinced her she could pursue full-time what she’d always seen as a hobby.

“I realized at that point that the professors in this management institute were doing the job full-time, and I could, too,” said Vera, who left the stock exchange and started teaching executive education full-time before ultimately earning her Ph.D. from the University of Western Ontario and taking an academic job with Bauer College.

***“I have these humongous hopes and beliefs for my children, and now I have that for my students, too. I see infinite possibility for all of them.”***

“The best part about being a professor is you are constantly learning,” Vera said. “It’s like being a student for a living. In order to be able to communicate all this new insight and knowledge to students, you have to learn and study yourself. For me, it’s the perfect job.”

She’d been teaching in the Department of Management at Bauer for three years before becoming pregnant through in vitro fertilization.

“I was 34, and it had been not so easy to get pregnant, and then I end up becoming pregnant with triplets,” Vera said. “Even when we were told I was pregnant, we were just so eager — all we had wanted was at least one child; we didn’t know what having three would be like.”

During her first prenatal appointment, a doctor told her, “Your job is to stay pregnant until week 32.” A follow-up visit with a high-risk OB-GYN raised the stakes to week 34.

“I taught at Bauer until week 20, which was the end of the spring semester,” Vera said. “I had extremely sweet students. If something dropped on the floor, they’d all rush to get it.”

At the start of the summer, she became a “couch potato,” albeit one that kept working — “I told my department chair, ‘I’m going to work on my research all summer from home.’”

At the end of her second trimester, though, Vera began to experience contractions.

“I went to the hospital, and they never let me leave. I spent seven weeks there on bedrest,” she said.

Vera made it exactly to week 34 of her pregnancy, giving birth to her triplets at the end of the summer. She named the children Liam, Tony and Dusya (in South American culture, it’s common to pass family names down to both daughters and sons). Life with three newborns was somewhat of a blur, she said.

“They were preemies, and two had to stay two weeks in the hospital, while another got a staph infection at birth in the hospital and had to stay two months,” Vera said.

Still, the family soon adjusted to the new reality, and she returned to face-to-face teaching the next spring.

“It became a constant journey in compartmentalizing,” Vera said, describing how she balanced career and motherhood.

Just before the triplets turned 2, she faced a new challenge, as Dusya and Liam were diagnosed with autism.

"If I have to think about my life, everything else seems so easy compared with the autism diagnosis," Vera said. "I didn't even know what autism was — zero knowledge. And these were my first kids, so I didn't know a lot about what they should be doing at different times, and they were preemies, so they were supposed to be delayed."

Her initial reaction was fear and panic.

"Usually when doctors tell you about autism, they don't say anything good," Vera said. "They only tell you it's a bad thing, and the kids will need massive therapy. It was very scary."

But, she determined that in order to help her children, she first had to change her perspective.

"I was still in a lot of fear, but then everything shifted," Vera said. "I realized that kids see the world through their parents' eyes. All the possibilities would open for them if they could see the possibility in my eyes."

That shift in thinking has made all the difference, she said.

"It's the power of attitude," Vera added. "We think autism is about sending the kid to therapy, and they do have to do massive therapy, but the attitude is more important. Autism sounds like a tragedy, but eventually, it can be the greatest opportunity for change and growth, for both the parent and the child. I've learned so much. The greatest lessons of my life didn't come from any academic program — they came from these three kids."

Now 10, the children still have challenges to overcome but are happy and determined, Vera said.

"Dusya is my decisive child — when she wants something, she will persist until she gets it. It's just a matter of what she decides to do with that persistence," she said. "Tony is very creative and funny. He wants to write in pictures; he's very visual. Liam has the most challenges with communication, but he's a very sweet boy, into musical instruments and vehicles."

Vera added: "I have three kids who are fantastic, and they are each a miracle in progress. They are learning so much and going out of their comfort zones. And, whatever we ask them to do, how could we do less? We have to rise to the challenge, too."

Motherhood has impacted Vera on the job, as well.

"Having triplets and kids with special needs, I think I'm more compassionate of what others are going through," she said. "I have these humongous hopes and beliefs for my children, and now I have that for my students, too. I see infinite possibility for all of them."

## On Another Note



## THE ART OF COMPARTMENTALIZING

Although Associate Professor Dusya Vera has plenty to keep her busy, she enjoys blocking chunks of time for her academic research.

"For example, on a certain week, I would block off some days on my calendar from 9-5, no teaching and no committees on those days, to shut my door and jump into my research," she said.

Vera's research focuses on leadership, strategy, organizational learning and improvisation. The latter was the focus of her doctoral dissertation and an area that she could draw personal experience from her time working in South America.

"We assume that we have to be prepared and plan everything, but in many cultures, improvisation is actually how business is done," Vera said. "In the North American context, the key is to learn how to improvise well, so that it can complement our planning skills. In so many industries where technology and innovation move fast, and you have to react to what competitors are doing or what customers are requesting, to be able to think on your feet and be creative and spontaneous on the go is very helpful."

She has published research in top academic and practitioner journals, including the *Academy of Management Review*, *Organization Science*, *The Leadership Quarterly* and *Journal of Management*, among others.