

KY STATE FAIR

## 'My real passion': How showing sheep gave this young Latina a new sense of direction

**Jason Gonzalez** Louisville Courier Journal

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Raquel Lopez's life has changed for the better.

The agricultural student at Western Kentucky University didn't anticipate sheep being at the forefront of her transformation just five years ago, but the 19-year-old native of Santa Rosa, California is confident she has found her true calling in life at a time when she thought she was running out of options.

“My groundbreaking moment was the first moment I ever stepped into a ring and brought to show my project,” Lopez said while waiting to show her smoked-colored sheep named “Ice” to the large crowd watching the 4H Future Farmers of America Market Lamb Showmanship competition at the Kentucky State Fair. “At first, I was really nervous and was scared that I was going to mess it up or I was going to let go of my lamb, but it actually turned out pretty good. I had a funny moment my first year showing my lamb, where I got pooped on by the lamb in front of me ... We got a good laugh out of it.”

Lopez credits her high school agricultural teacher, and legal guardian Dawn Stornetta for steering the wheel on her agricultural journey.

“My mom helped me pursue my dream, and she is my mentor,” Lopez said of Stornetta. “I kind of have her to thank for being involved in the sheep industry and she kind of helped me find out where my real passion was, which was artificial insemination, which is what I want to do once I'm done with school.”

Stornetta, 44, migrated to the Bluegrass State in the summer of 2019, two years after losing her home in the California wildfires. Around the same time, Stornetta learned that Lopez's living situation had taken a turn for the worse.

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"Raquel was really at a point with her family where her (biological) mom didn't want anything to do with her," Stornetta said. "Her parents, they had a very abusive relationship. Raquel has two siblings and then a half-brother as well. And her dad was arrested."

"When I decided to come to Kentucky, she asked if she could come," Stornetta told the Courier Journal. "I've been in the business of teaching for over 15 years, and if that's what it takes to save a kid, you save the kid, so her mom signed her over to me."

Stornetta obtained legal guardianship of Lopez, ultimately bringing her on the 2,300-mile voyage cross country from California to Kentucky.

Since then, she's competed in numerous sheep showing competitions, including her recent turn at the Kentucky State Fair where Lopez and "Ice" finished in second place behind handler Sam Benton and "Texas Pete." In the winner's circle, Benton praised the runner-up.

"I like Raquel, I've known her for a while. She moved here from California and made a name for herself," Benton said. "It's a mutual respect thing, no matter what."

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Volunteer Maddox Trammel, 8, was thrilled to witness "Texas Pete" and "Ice" strive for top billing.

"My favorite animal at the fair are the sheep," Trammel said. "My favorite part of the fair is getting the sheep ready, feeding them and drenching them (keeping the sheep hydrated). On a scale of 1-10, my level of excitement is 100."

Trammel's reaction is part of what makes agriculture competitions enjoyable for Lopez and makes Stornetta proud of what her daughter has, and will, accomplish.

"She's going to be making her own decisions, cause she's going to have to be an adult on her own, and I can't always be there to decide everything for her," Stornetta said. "She has come a long way since we moved out here. I made it very clear to her that as long as she wants to show, I will fund it and no matter what, I will make sure that she gets to do whatever it is that she wants to do. Because that's going to shape her and how her future comes out."

Lopez enjoyed competing at the State Fair, which continues at the Kentucky State Fairgrounds through Sunday, Aug. 28, and is enthusiastic about her future in the agricultural industry.

"My goal is to be an artificial inseminator and help develop and make the livestock industry grow," Lopez said. "And get that new level of genetics out there that will bring our whole industry to a whole new level."

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## **How much are tickets for the 2022 Kentucky State Fair?**

Online tickets are \$10 per person, which includes parking. Advance admission tickets are only available online through [kystatefair.org/tickets](https://kystatefair.org/tickets). Children 5 and under are free.

Admission at the gate is \$10 per person and \$10 to park per vehicle.

Kentucky State Fair admission and ride wristbands are available online via Ticketmaster and at all participating Kroger locations. Visit [kystatefair.org/tickets](https://kystatefair.org/tickets) for details.

