



Women's Volleyball | 10/18/2018 11:18:00 AM | Shawn D. Smith, Director of Athletic Media Relations

## Costa Rican Transplant to Volleyball Team Embraces Opportunity at Minnesota Crookston



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**CROOKSTON, Minn.** - When the first snowfall hit in early October in Crookston, Minn., many people cringed at a possible early start to winter in Northwest Minnesota. There was one person who had the opposite reaction, which was joy, a common emotion for a fun-loving newcomer to Minnesota Crookston. Her name is Melissa Maria Rodriguez Chavarria, but you can just call her Meli. The junior middle hitter on the Minnesota Crookston volleyball team is in her first year at Minnesota Crookston after transferring from Otero Junior College in Colorado by way of her hometown of Sarchi, Costa Rica.

You would not be able to find many similarities between Sarchi and Crookston, other than the population of both being around 7,000. Rodriguez's hometown sits on the slopes of the Cordillera Central mountain range in the Central American nation of Costa Rica, which has an average temperature of 80 degrees Fahrenheit in October, which is quite the contrast to her new home in Minnesota. However, the newcomer to the Golden Eagles has embraced the snow and her new family at Minnesota Crookston, who have welcomed her with open arms.

"My whole team has been so welcoming since day one," Rodriguez said. "They even reached out when I first committed this summer. They all texted me. It was very nice to know that I would be surrounded by great people that all support me. If I get home sick I am going to have them to rely on and comfort me. My coaches have also been a great support system."

Rodriguez has known since early in her time in high school back in Costa Rica that she would like to pursue an education in the United States, and also play at a high level of college volleyball. Growing up around volleyball, it had always been her dream to play at a high level, a goal that her parents Rose Mary Chavarria and Mario Rodriguez embraced.


"They have always been very supportive," Rodriguez said. "When I talked to them about coming to the States, it is great to have that kind of support system (Junior College). They were able to come up with me and they got to see the school. When they first heard I was going to come to Minnesota Crookston they were a little worried because it was a completely different weather from back home. They were still very excited that I would have this opportunity to come to a new state and meet new friends and new people and be part of a new team."

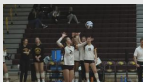
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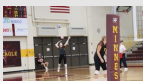
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Rodriguez grew up around the sport of volleyball with her parents both playing at a high level in Costa Rica. Her mother, Rose Mary, was the captain of the Costa Rica national team, while Mario played club volleyball at a high level. The love of volleyball in her family helped drive her goal to play in the United States, a goal she first achieved at Otero Junior College in La Junta, Colo.

"Since I was in high school I knew that I wanted to come play in the states and study here because the competitive level is higher and it is much easier to play volleyball and study at the same time than it is in Costa Rica," Rodriguez said. "From my sophomore year on in high school I was looking for schools. I was able to get an offer from my junior college, which I was very lucky to have. I was very excited because I was going to make my dream become reality. I went to Otero Junior College and then when my sophomore year came around I began contacting four-year schools. The recruiting process had to start all over, which was a little hard because it is always a really long process. I was able to get in touch with Coach Sarah (Rauen) and we were able to talk and get everything done. I am very happy that now this is my home."

She has enjoyed the level of competitive volleyball in the United States, which she believes is better than back home in Costa Rica. It was something she was always looking for when she had her eyes set on coming to the United States and she has not been let down since beginning her college volleyball journey.

"I would say that I definitely feel that it is much more competitive here," Rodriguez said. "Not necessarily only in the NSIC but all around the country. It is not the level in Costa Rica is bad. It is not bad at all. It is also depends on which team you are a part of. Every team is going to have different ways they are being coached and the way everything is planned out. I do see more competitiveness here than back home. That is what I was looking for when I came to the United States. I wanted a higher level and more competitive volleyball."

In addition to volleyball, an even bigger driving factor was the pursuit of a college education in the United States. Rodriguez is still trying to figure out her path once she gets the University of Minnesota degree, but she is excited about what the future has to offer, whether it is a career in the U.S., graduate school or returning to her home country.

"I have definitely been thinking that I would maybe like to look into graduate school for occupational therapy," Rodriguez said. "That is just one of the options that I have. I would definitely like to stay in the United States if I get a job or graduate opportunity. You never know what is going to come up. If anything like that comes up I wouldn't mind taking it. I don't mind staying in the United States at all. Not necessarily Minnesota but anywhere in the U.S. After a few years I think I would like to go back to Costa Rica."

For now, Rodriguez is focused on her education at Minnesota Crookston and helping out the Minnesota Crookston volleyball team in any way possible. So far she has played in nine matches with 20 kills. One thing that you know you will get every time Meli steps on to the court is energy, exuberance and a giant smile and the occasional jump for joy any time a great play is made by her teammates.

Though her parents Rose Mary and Mario have yet to make it to campus, they continue to watch her every time she hits the court at Minnesota Crookston and are her biggest supporters back in Costa Rica.

"Sadly my parents have not been able to be up here yet, but hopefully they will in the future," Rodriguez said. "Technology is such a big deal right now and that has helped us out a lot. Not only are they able to watch my games live but we are able to face time every now and then. It is almost as if they are here but not quite. But definitely having the live streams is very hopeful. Right after the games they are texting me saying 'you guys should have done this' or 'it was so good when you guys did this'. They are always giving me advice or things we should do next time."

Rodriguez definitely misses her family, but she also feels a void when it comes to homemade meals from her mother, including Rose Mary's Sunday breakfast meal of gallo pinto.

"There is something called gallo pinto," Rodriguez said. "You can eat it for any meal but that is our typical breakfast food. My mom would make it every Sunday morning and you just knew it would be there every Sunday."

In the absence of gallo pinto, she enjoys going to Grand Forks occasionally to eat her favorite meal of sushi or she also embraced a love for pizza. So while it is sometimes tough to be so far away from home, Rodriguez has continued to embrace her new family and a loving and supportive environment in her new home in Crookston. So in January when the snow is continuing to fall and everyone is longing for the sunshine, look for the ray of sunshine on the smile of the face of Meli as she embraces her new journey in the United States and her love for life. It will surely bring a smile to your face, as well.

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