

Free: Summer First Aid Chart

# Woman's Day

LIVE WELL EVERY DAY

special section

## 84 Health Tips

Live Longer, Feel Better,  
Have More Energy

## 20 Ways to Save \$100

Or More *Right Now*

## 13 TOP FAT BUSTERS

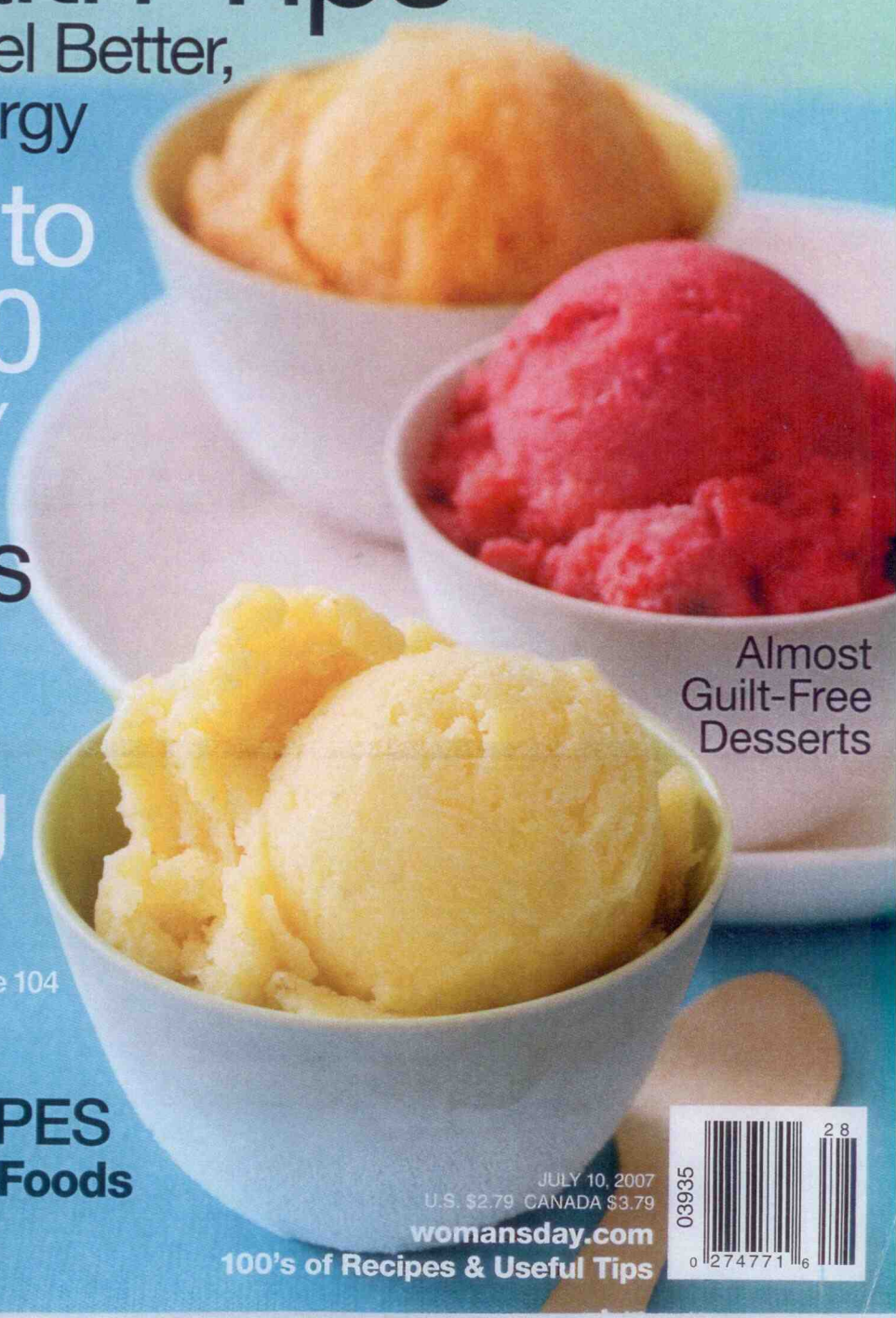
See Results Fast!

## The Best Organizing Advice

We've Ever Heard, page 104

## 15 FAVORITE SUMMER RECIPES

PLUS: 10 Top **Power Foods**

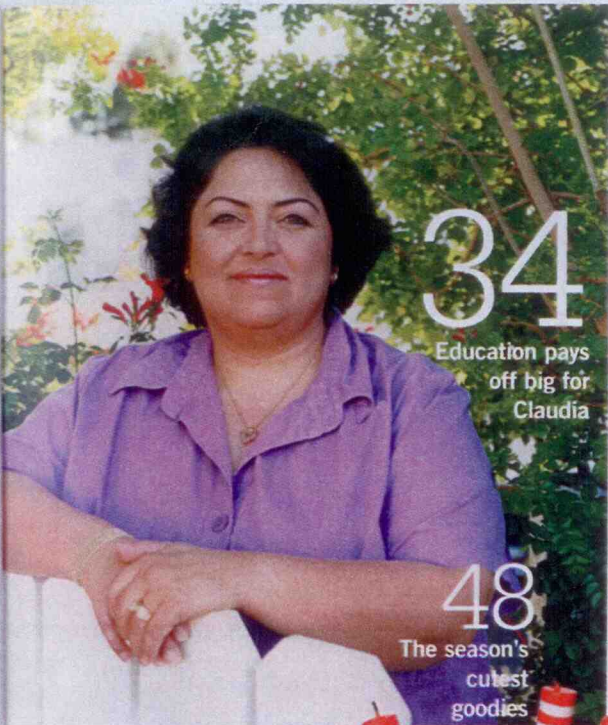


Almost  
Guilt-Free  
Desserts

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100's of Recipes & Useful Tips





34

Education pays off big for Claudia

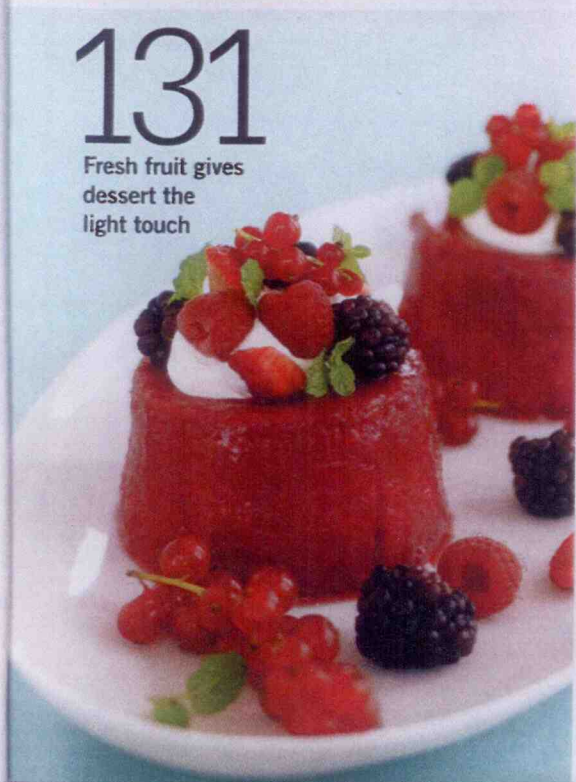
48

The season's cutest goodies



76

Feel good, look good: 84 tips



131

Fresh fruit gives dessert the light touch

"Behold, the former things are come to pass, and new things do I declare."  
Isaiah 42:9

## solutions

- 99 **TAKE TIME TO** Create a Chic Spa Look
- 100 **TIP TALK** Finally, how to solve pesky little problems around the house *by Janet Sobesky*
- 104 **GET ORGANIZED** Mind over matter with Peter Walsh *by Sonal Dutt*
- 110 **20 WAYS TO SAVE \$100** It'll add up faster than you think *by Gretchen Roberts*
- 119 **GO FOR THE BOLD** Find the right shade for your rooms—and emotions.

## eat well

- 125 **TAKE TIME TO** Make Raspberry Lemonade
- 126 **GOOD COOKS** Q&A with Bobby Flay, three ways with shrimp, and more *by Marisol Vera*
- 129 **MONTH OF MENUS**
- 131 **ALMOST GUILT-FREE DESSERTS** Lowfat treats for hot summer days.
- 143 **IN THE KITCHEN WITH CONNIE GUTTERSEN** The Sonoma Diet creator shares her secrets.
- 148 **QUICK COOK** Cajun chicken and rice in less than 20 minutes *by Terry Grieco Kenny*
- 150 **EAT SMART** Vacation dining; whole-grain options; the benefits of watermelon *by Madonna Behen*
- 152 **COVER RECIPE** Sorbets

## how to reach us

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COVER PHOTOGRAPH BY CHARLES SCHILLER, food styling by Frank P. Melodia, prop styling by Gerri Williams

ISABEL GARCIA (left); COIRAL VON ZUMWALT (top right); CHRYA WATA (right); FIGURA (right); MELODIA (right); WILLIAMS (right)

# against all odds, I got my degree

The uphill battle that led one woman to the career of her dreams

NAME ..... *Claudia Rodriguez* .....  
AGE ..... *38* .....  
HOME ..... *San Pedro, CA* .....  
OCCUPATION ..... *Lawyer* .....



by Claudia Rodriguez, as told to Sally Stich

**I**F YOU'D ASKED ME AT 18 what I planned to do with my life, I would've said: teach English in Mexico City. The job paid pretty well and didn't require a college degree, which was fine because we didn't have a lot of money. Little did I know that a trip to the U.S. would lead me down a whole different path.

## coming to america

As part of my training to be a teacher, I went to southern California after graduating high school in 1987. It was like a dream come true. I spent most of my time walking around Long Beach, where my aunt and uncle lived, listening to people just so I could learn how Americans really talked. But two months after I arrived, my father got laid off back in Mexico and my parents didn't have enough money to bring me home.

I had no option but to find work. With my visa I got a Social Security number and applied for jobs, finally taking one at the only place that called me back: a factory that made electronic switches and paid \$3.75 an hour. Working on the assembly line was tedious and exhausting, but I endured it because it helped my parents. I told myself I would send money as long as I had to, even though it also meant working 10 hours a week at McDonald's to make ends meet.

I tried not to complain, but one day *(Please turn to 36)*

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## Walgreens

### AGAINST ALL ODDS

CONTINUED I couldn't stop myself from fussing to my cousin Rogelio. He told me that going to college would get me a better life. But I could never afford it. "In America, financial aid and grants make it possible for almost anyone to get a degree," Rogelio shot back.

I knew he was right, but as long as I had family obligations, I couldn't even consider it.

The only bright spot was that I had met a wonderful man, Jose, who had been in the United States since he was 13 and painted cars at a body shop. I fell in love with Jose and wanted to stay in America to be with him. I continued to work both jobs, sending my folks money for four years. The day my father told me he got a job, I did something that radically changed my life—I opened a savings account. My goal: to get my GED.

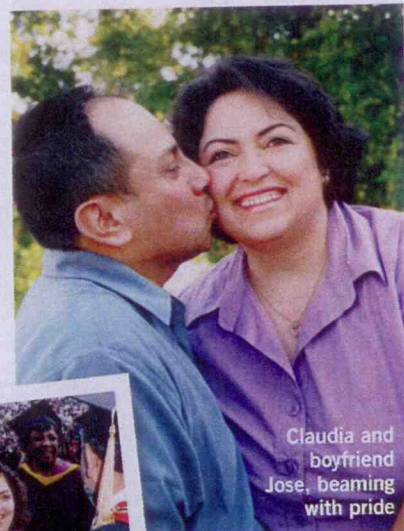
### taking the challenge

I saved and saved until I finally had enough money to cut back my work hours and get my GED. I got it in four months, and by then I knew I wanted to go to college. Soon I was taking four to six classes a semester at Los Angeles Harbor College, a small public community college about 10 minutes from where I lived, and working 35 hours a week helping disabled students.

On the outside I guess I looked like the picture of determination and efficiency, but inside I was churning with anxiety. The memory of working in the factory was always in my head, reminding me that I might end up back in that kind of job. I was so driven to do well

that I studied all the time. I started getting headaches, gained weight and felt horrible.

My job working with disabled students kept things in perspective, especially one particular student.



Claudia and  
boyfriend  
Jose, beaming  
with pride



He was almost totally paralyzed and difficult to understand. He couldn't write or turn a page. But he was

always cheerful, and even after his mother—and primary caregiver—died of cancer, he was determined to graduate. How could I give up when I saw that?

### seeing the future

In California, if you graduate from a community college with a certain GPA, you're almost guaranteed admission to a state university. I chose California State University-Dominguez Hills, even though it meant taking out student loans. I fretted to a professor, who said to me, "Some people take a loan to buy a Mercedes, which loses value the minute it leaves the dealership. But educational loans will always be worth their value because an education can change your life."

#### WEB EXTRA

CLICK **If you're thinking about going back to school, go to [womansday.com/school](http://womansday.com/school) for a list of resources.**

I studied business administration and by now, Jose and I were living together. One day my sister, who was staying with us, said, "I want to marry a doctor or lawyer." I was surprised when I heard myself say, "I want to *be* a doctor or lawyer."

In that moment, I saw my future as I flashed back to an incident in junior high. I'd tried to protect a girl from a bully, but the teacher told me it was none of my business. I was angry at the injustice, but I obeyed, promising myself one day I'd help people who couldn't help themselves. Becoming a lawyer seemed like a perfect fit. In my senior year at CSU-DH, I applied to three top law schools.

What a blow when I was rejected by all three. Thank God for my friend and mentor, Maria Rosa Garcia-Acevedo, a political science professor, who suggested I get a master's degree to bolster my resume and then apply again. I took her advice and she was right, but not exactly in the way she intended. During the year I got my master's in behavioral sciences, I heard about Whittier Law School. It was smaller than the schools that had rejected me, so I applied and was accepted as a part-time night student in 2001.

## living the dream

I graduated law school in three and a half years, at the age of 35. My goal was so close. But then I failed the bar exam by four points. The news was devastating. However, a friend said something I could not ignore: "Don't just be a law school graduate. Be a lawyer." The second time I took the exam, I passed.

Today I work at a legal services center in family law, helping battered women file restraining orders, get custody of their children and navigate divorce proceedings. To show disadvantaged women how the system can protect their rights makes me proud every day. It also makes me appreciate what this country has done for me. In Mexico, I never would've gotten a law degree, probably not even a college degree. But here, I'm proof that anyone with determination can be what they want. I am deeply grateful.

Just as gratifying is what Jose said a couple of years ago: "I saw what you did and I want to do it, too." He's already completed his AA and BA degrees and will get a master's degree in public administration this December. After all those years of him being my rock, I'm thrilled to trade places.

Looking back, I know that getting an education was worth every challenge. Why? Because the only thing better than looking forward to going to work each day is knowing I'm making a difference in other people's lives.

wd

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