



UFM

UNIVERSIDAD FRANCISCO MARROQUÍN

ita

Impulso al Talento Académico

P R O F I L E

Hector's Story

What Is It Like To Be a Pioneer?



Hector, his parents, and his seven siblings hail from a tiny town in Alta Verapaz. While technological advances have begun to shift the cultural landscape of Hector's hometown, the level of infrastructure and development remains inchoate.

"There are no paved roads, only dirt and stone ones, which makes it difficult to get there when it's raining. Also, we've only had access to electricity for about ten years, so most people don't watch television."

Hector describes the population of the village as entirely indigenous; Hector's parents made a living as their predecessors did, raising small crops of black beans, corn, coffee, and cardamom. By and large, the price of this cultural continuity has been education: as a child, Hector didn't know a soul who had completed the sixth grade.

Neither of Hector's parents learned to read or write, so he joined a group of classmates who helped each other with homework. With each passing year, the group thinned, as an increasing number of parents from the village required their children to assist them in the fields.

"I started first grade as one of thirty students. Only two of us graduated from the sixth grade, and I am the only one who continued on to middle school."

Throughout this period, Hector attended school until noon, and then worked with his father until five o'clock in the evening, planting, fertilizing, and harvesting the crops. At night, he did his homework by candlelight.

Hector faced the prospect of middle school as a pioneer; there were no upper level schools in town. His closest option, twenty miles away, was a school funded by the Ministry of Agriculture to prepare students for careers in farming. Along with core academic courses, Hector and his fellow students received skill-based training in areas such as poultry and swine production. The school provided food and lodging Monday through Friday, and Hector paid for the weekly bus rides to and from his home.

The most formidable challenge that Hector faced in his new school was a language barrier. Although Hector had learned to read Spanish through his textbooks, his teachers, parents, and friends spoke Q'eqchi', one of the twenty-one Mayan languages spoken in Guatemala.

“When I got to school, I had real trouble putting my thoughts into words and the other students joked about the way I talked.”

It wasn't until a friend took the time to coach Hector with his Spanish that he began to feel comfortable talking to his classmates in Spanish.

Though Hector had an interest in learning other occupations, he knew his years of agricultural training would qualify him for a scholarship to the National School of Agriculture, a public high school in Guatemala City with an excellent job placement record. By the time he graduated from high school, Hector's technical training surpassed that of most Guatemalans; however, he was certain of his desire to attend a university.

After a brief stint working for an NGO in his home province, Hector learned about the US-based Cooperative Association of States for Scholarships (CASS) that provided training to low-income students from Latin America. Through the program, Hector was able to study agribusiness in California. Once again, Hector leveraged his background in agriculture to further his education, and once more was forced to overcome a language barrier.

“When I arrived in Modesto, California, I realized that I would have to teach myself English to do the coursework.”

Hector completed the two-year CASS program and returned to Guatemala, where he found himself highly qualified but unable to find employment. After months of fruitless job searches in his field, he saw a flyer that advertised a job opening for an English teacher near his hometown. He applied and got the position.

Though his modest teaching income allowed him to live well by the subsistence standards of his town, Hector continued to hold a candle to his dream of attending a university. He saved money to return to Guatemala City, where he entered the National Conservatory to study piano and he began to attend college fairs around the city.

“I applied for every scholarship I could find. I applied for one scholarship four times, and was turned down each time because they told me that I had enough training to work in a decent agricultural job.”

When he was down to his last few dollars, he discovered the ITA scholarship.

Studying at UFM

Despite his diverse experience, when Hector arrived at UFM he felt like he was stepping into another world.

“I encountered a side of Guatemala that I was entirely unfamiliar with. All of the students at UFM looked like the people I had seen in the United States. I even took a photograph on my first day to show to my friends.”

Hector acknowledges that his familiarity with English gave him an advantage over fellow ITA scholarship students, who struggled with the heavy load of highly technical reading material that was mostly in English. Instead, Hector found himself facing a different challenge—bridging the wide social divide that isolated him from students raised in the capital.

“The first thing you need in relating to people is something in common, and I didn’t have anything in common with most of the students at UFM. I had to build that.”

During the group projects that are a fixture of the UFM curriculum, Hector made pointed efforts to mingle with all of his classmates, rather than withdraw into the safe camaraderie of his ITA peers. He found that his optimism and dogged persistence both distinguished him and made him a welcome addition to most groups.



Postgraduation Career

Hector has worked for a number of firms since graduating cum laude from UFM in 2008. He currently works as a financial analyst, and hopes to return to school someday for his MBA. Eventually, he would like to work as a finance director for a local or multinational corporation and then start his own business in Guatemala.

“The satisfaction I get from work isn’t based on making money; it comes from using all of my skills and abilities. That’s what drives me to take on greater challenges.”

Hector is a trailblazer in his family and in his community. Though he was the first person in his town to complete the sixth grade, six of his seven siblings have since completed high school.

Hector often returns home and shares the information on the schools that he has attended and the opportunities he has utilized.

“More children from my hometown finish sixth grade now and three of them are studying at universities. That has been the impact of my success.”
