



UFM

UNIVERSIDAD FRANCISCO MARROQUÍN

ita

Impulso al Talento Académico

P R O F I L E

Irene's Story

What Does a Leader Look Like?



Irene is the oldest of seven children— six girls and one boy. Her father grew up in a household plagued by poverty and alcoholism. He quit school at sixteen when he was unable to pay a nominal fee that was not covered by his scholarship. As a father, he hoped that his children's education would surpass his own, regardless of their gender.

“People used to say to my father, ‘Almost all girls. What a shame.’ My father would answer, ‘Why? Girls can do the same things that boys do.’ ”

Irene's family lived for years in a small, mostly indigenous mountain town where residents farm corn and peaches, and weave traditional cloth. When Irene was eleven years old, her parents relocated to a large city in Guatemala's western highlands, in pursuit of greater educational opportunities for their children. Irene attended an all-girls middle school and researched her options for high school. Although she had a passion for drawing and painting, she felt compelled to prepare for a financially stable profession. She eventually enrolled in a local boys school that trained students for careers in architectural drawing.

Irene wasn't the school's first female student, but she was an anomaly. Of the three hundred and fifty students, she was one of only fifteen girls. During her junior year, Irene became even more conspicuous when she ran for student body president and won.

“Being president at an all-boys school was challenging. A number of male students had trouble dealing with a woman in charge.”

Irene and the other student council members were largely responsible for generating school revenue through donations, fundraising, and local municipal funding. The job was demanding and Irene and her team struggled to balance academics and their commitment to their positions. She and the other council members often stayed at school until late at night to organize activities.

During her senior year, Irene's school was invited to send its top student to a convention, known as Protagonistas, in Guatemala City to meet with representatives from national universities and scholarship programs.

“There was another student who had better grades than I did. However, the director of the school told me he wanted me to go because of my leadership skills and that it was a requirement to attend.”

Irene was surprised to learn about the ITA scholarship and all it included. In addition to covering tuition, the scholarship aims to help students focus on their studies by paying for room and board and providing a stipend for books, transportation, personal expenses, and visits home.

Applying for the ITA Scholarship

Irene returned home determined to apply for the scholarship. Though paying the application fee was a challenge for the family, Irene’s father was committed to providing his daughter with the opportunities he had missed.

As Irene prepared for the math entrance exam, she realized how far the curriculum of her public school lagged behind that of private schools in Guatemala City. She studied furiously, with the help of her math teacher, using an algebra textbook she checked out from the library. After passing the exam, she returned to Guatemala City for a long day of interviews that came to a nail-biting conclusion.

“At the end of the day, I was competing for the last scholarship with another classmate from my school . . . When I found out I won, I knew how lucky I really was.”

Studying at UFM

Irene’s math deficiency haunted her first semester at UFM.

“Where other people studied for an hour, I needed three.”

Though she completed her first semester’s math class with a passing grade, Irene elected to take it again. She risked a lower grade, but she felt strongly that it was vital to improve her foundational knowledge of the subject. Her hard work paid off. The second time around, she finished near the top of her class.

Irene continued to pursue leadership opportunities at UFM. She represented Guatemala at a student conference at the Vatican in 2003 and participated in Students in Free Enterprise (SIFE), where she and fellow classmates developed business projects under the mentorship of local business leaders. In 2004, Irene’s team elected her to give a presentation at the SIFE world championships in Barcelona.

Irene also participated in student exchange programs: first at the Instituto Tecnológico de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey in Mexico, and then at Chile’s Pontificia Universidad Católica.



Postgraduation Career

By the time she completed her coursework in 2005, Irene was already working as an assistant professor at UFM. She subsequently worked at a local investment bank and in the finance departments of two large local companies. Irene continued to volunteer her time and expertise on evenings and weekends as a SIFE mentor, and she accompanied the teams from UFM and another local university to international competitions in Toronto, Paris, and Los Angeles.

In 2009, Irene moved abroad and now works as a financial analyst for a pharmaceutical company.

“For one UFM course, I wrote down my future goals. I’m surprised to see how many I have accomplished—working in a multinational corporation, living abroad, helping to support my family’s education.”

Irene has gone from being a scholarship recipient to a benefactor. Since leaving UFM, she has helped send two of her siblings to college and she is a generous annual donor to the ITA program.