



UFM

UNIVERSIDAD FRANCISCO MARROQUÍN

ita

Impulso al Talento Académico

P R O F I L E

Oscar's Story

Do You Have a Vision for the Future?



When Oscar was growing up, his hometown was populated almost exclusively by poor subsistence farmers like his parents.

“My first house had a dirt floor and walls made from cornstalks. When it rained, wind and water swept through our home.”

During Oscar's early childhood, his family grew corn and beans on a rented plot of land. When Oscar was five years old, his father began farming and selling cabbage. As soon as they were able, Oscar and his three younger siblings began working long days in the fields, planting and harvesting alongside their parents.

Oscar's father left school after the first grade and his mother had no formal schooling at all. Oscar's parents believed that work was necessary for survival and that sending their children to school meant there were fewer bodies working in the field.

“For two years I begged my father to let me go. He wouldn't. He said school is for lazy people who don't want to work.”

When Oscar was seven, his father relented. Oscar was allowed to go to school provided he continue to work before and after his classes. Every morning beginning at five o'clock, he would work for two hours in the fields before racing to school.

“I can still see myself flying down the hill, tears in my eyes, desperate not to be late. I would arrive to class hungry, with no breakfast, filthy and sticky with sweat.”

Oscar completed his elementary and middle school education in his hometown, but there weren't any high schools there. Fortunately, a man from a local farmers cooperative offered to pay for his high school education at a private school in Guatemala City. Oscar took the bus into the city, Monday through Friday, and continued to work with his family when he got home.

Slowly, Oscar's parents began to pull themselves out of poverty. His mother sold vegetables from their farm in the market of a nearby town. When Oscar was seventeen, she earned enough to buy a permanent stall in the marketplace. Still, Oscar's father threatened to pull his younger children out of school to work; and Oscar graduated high school determined to provide for the costs of their education. Using information from the farmers cooperative, he helped his parents learn to plant and harvest snow peas, which promised greater profits for their farm. The investment paid off and within two years the family was able to begin building a new home.

Having helped secure his family's economic future, Oscar returned to school. He attended classes at the public university in Guatemala City for less than a semester.

“There were seventy students jammed into a classroom built for thirty people. If my bus arrived a minute late, I couldn't get a seat.”

Oscar began researching and applying for scholarships to private institutions and was accepted to a two-year program in the United States. Without knowing a word of English, Oscar went to Wisconsin, where he earned an associate degree in small business administration. In 1997, he returned to Guatemala and began work with an organization that provided small loans—known as microcredit—to families in rural Quiché. However, he still had not surrendered his dream of completing a college education.

Applying for the ITA Scholarship

A co-worker told Oscar about the ITA scholarship and he immediately called UFM to learn more. After passing the admissions exams, Oscar qualified to interview for a scholarship. Most of the other candidates had just completed high school; the majority came from poor, rural towns throughout Guatemala. Oscar remembers that the admissions committee asked him why, having already earned an associate degree, he should be considered for one of only four ITA scholarships. His response indicated the determination and drive that the committee mines for:

“I said, ‘I have a clear vision for my future. If I don't get this scholarship, I will find another way to complete my education.’”

Studying at UFM

Unlike many of his classmates, Oscar came to UFM with a great deal of work experience and he was eager to apply the principles he was learning in the classroom to real world endeavors.

He continued to help his mother operate her growing business. They began supplying vegetables to a large grocery store chain in Guatemala City. Simultaneously, Oscar started two businesses of his own—a grocery delivery service and an international trucking company. While he turned a neat profit with the first enterprise, the transportation company suffered serious losses.

“The teachers union was on strike for three months. Every day their demonstrations blocked the roads and destroyed my business.”

Having experienced both great success and failure, Oscar graduated from UFM in 2005, more prepared than most students to make his way in the business world.



Postgraduation Career

After graduating, Oscar travelled throughout Central America, implementing development programs for various international agencies. He noticed that these large organizations often squandered funds through ill-considered projects.

“I’ve seen people selling donated stoves as scrap metal because they didn’t value them or weren’t taught how to maintain them.”

In 2007, Oscar won a Fulbright Scholarship to study international development at Texas A&M University. He returned to Guatemala with a clear vision of his life’s purpose.

Since 2009, Oscar has devoted all of his energy to building a comprehensive development project in his hometown. The heart and brain center of the project is his local church, which reaches out to the community through health, education, economic, and spiritual development initiatives. It also operates health clinics, provides lunches to hungry children and pregnant mothers, and tutors local students. Like the international development groups where Oscar used to work, his program also provides big ticket items like stoves and latrines for families who can’t afford them. However, Oscar is careful to avoid a “dependency problem” by making sure people invest in their own well-being.

“We know that if you buy a \$500 item for \$50, you feel like you got a good deal and you will take care of what you purchased.”

In just four years, Oscar's program has had a profound impact on his hometown. The success of Oscar's model has drawn attention and the model is being replicated in other communities in Guatemala with the assistance of several international organizations. Ultimately, Oscar hopes that it will expand throughout Central America.