



UFM

UNIVERSIDAD FRANCISCO MARROQUÍN

ita

Impulso al Talento Académico

P R O F I L E

Shirley's Story

What If You Had an "Impossible" Dream?



Shirley is the oldest of three girls raised by a single mother in a small rural village in southern Guatemala. Shirley's father left when she was only three years old and her mother had to support her daughters on a kindergarten teacher's salary.

"My mother dreamed of studying at a university but her parents had no money to support her education. Even so, she worked hard to get a technical certificate so she could teach."

Education in Guatemala's provinces is often inadequate and inconvenient. While Shirley was growing up, there was only one kindergarten and an elementary school in town; students who wanted to attend middle school had to travel twenty-five miles to the provincial capital, Chiquimula, by public bus.

"The road was really dangerous at that time and there were only two old buses that went to Chiquimula early in the morning, and they didn't run every day."

Shirley was lucky to earn a scholarship so she could attend a private middle school in Chiquimula, but she had to leave home and move in with a family friend. The arrangement lasted through middle school, but her mother found it increasingly difficult to pay for Shirley's living expenses. Shirley returned home to attend high school, where she faced a situation shared by the rural poor throughout Guatemala—a public high school system that more often than not stifles aspiration.

Public high schools in Guatemala are structured on the presumption that low-income students will not attend universities. In contrast to their private counterparts in Guatemala City, public high schools in provincial regions offer job skills training but little preparation for a university curriculum. With no other immediate options, Shirley began studying at a technical school that would train her to be a kindergarten teacher like her mother. At the same time, she made weekly visits to the director of the La Salle School, a private high school in Chiquimula. Although the school had no scholarship program, after four months of trying, Shirley was able to convince the director to find donors to fund her education.

Shirley's mother and sisters were proud of her accomplishment but other relatives and neighbors strongly disapproved and eventually her family was ostracized in their small community.

“Everybody said that I had to work because I was the oldest child in the family and we were not rich enough to waste time in high school.”

During high school, Shirley began volunteering for development projects in and around her hometown. Shirley had always had a passion for helping others, but now, surrounded by foreign development workers, Shirley's goals began to take shape. Shirley felt that she had discovered her vocation—a career in international relations and development. In order to pursue this improbable dream, Shirley knew that she would have to attend a university in Guatemala City.

“I only had one idea: I wanted to study at the best university in my country, a private university called Universidad Francisco Marroquín.”

Applying for the ITA Scholarship

Shirley's mother borrowed money for two bus tickets to the capital. Neither Shirley nor her mother had ever been to Guatemala City before, yet they navigated their way through the city of over two million people to the home of an old family friend. Her mother's friend helped them locate the university and serendipitously told them about the ITA program.

Shirley arrived at the UFM campus brimming with hope; she was profoundly disappointed to learn that at the time the university did not offer ITA scholarships for students studying international relations. The primary rationale for the exclusion was that low-income students like Shirley rarely have the foundation in English required for such a career. Disheartened but not defeated, Shirley decided to take a two-prong approach—she applied to UFM for both international relations and economics, an area that did fall under the ITA scholarship umbrella.

The ITA committee initially rejected Shirley as a candidate for the international relations program and awarded her a scholarship to study economics. But Shirley refused to accept a scholarship at the cost of her dreams. After several more rounds of interviews, Shirley's determination and talent outweighed the reservations of the ITA committee, who sought additional donors to fund her scholarship; in 2005, Shirley became the first ITA scholarship student at UFM's Institute of Political Science and International Relations.

“I still cry when I remember that moment, when I got the key to unlock a world of opportunities.”

Studying at UFM

In her first year at UFM, Shirley worked hard and was one of three students in her department on the honor roll. However, the farther she advanced in school, the more her poor English skills burdened her progress. Readings were often assigned in English and,

even worse, she knew that she could not enroll in the many courses offered by visiting professors who spoke no Spanish. Shirley could not afford private English lessons, nor was she able to find anyone to help pay for them. Finally, when she was on the brink of leaving UFM, the head of the Department of Social Sciences extended Shirley a lifeline. He offered to contact a friend in the United States who could help Shirley learn English by immersion.



“I went to Virginia to live with an anthropology professor who didn’t know any Spanish but was glad to help me to learn English. When I arrived at her home all I could say in



English was hi, table, apple, and goodbye.”

In a few months, Shirley learned enough English to pass the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and returned to UFM, where she graduated cum laude in 2010.

Postgraduation Career

After graduating, Shirley began work with the Institute for Development Cooperation (ICEP), where she managed a development initiative that provides poor Guatemalan women with entrepreneurial training. Shirley aimed to expand the scope of the program by helping the women find credit opportunities so they could start their own businesses.

“No matter how good you are at something or how much knowledge you have, without money you don’t have the essential tool to pull yourself out of poverty.”

She reached out to representatives from Grameen Bank, an organization founded to provide microcredit to small businesspeople. After collaborating with the bank on the ICEP project, Shirley was offered a job managing microloans in New York City.

Shirley is still most passionate about accelerating development in her home country. At one point, she worked with large telecommunications companies in the United States and Guatemala to develop a pilot project that would provide Internet access to remote areas of the country.

Though her work prevents frequent trips home to Guatemala, her success story is well-known in her hometown. She is a role model for young people in her community and for her family; in

fact, one of her younger sisters is currently a student at UFM, thanks to her own hard work and a partial scholarship.